

**Centre for Human Rights Education**

**Modern Yoga Practice and Human Rights as Reflective,  
Embodied Experience**

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**This thesis is presented for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
of  
Curtin University**

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## **Declaration of Originality**

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university, and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed:  On: 01/03/18

## Abstract

Humanity is grappling with some deeply complex situations, including the survival of our species, of all species and of our shared environments. It is pivotal to decide where to devote our attention, when there are so many possibilities. However, being stuck in inertia at such a grave time is all too commonplace. Far from giving up, this is the time for collective collaboration. The thesis argues that the central task of the human rights project, at this point in time, is to act on injustice and to reach out to those who are vulnerable. Without this action, I fear that human rights will become inconsequential. I argue that the ability to take action has become the most compelling ethical imperative of our time.

Taking action is the underlying thread that weaves this thesis together. There is a compelling need for research that considers personally meaningful approaches to human rights activism. Moreover, in addition to this interest in meaning making, there is growing public interest in the issues that are at the forefront of our social and political landscapes. The treatment of asylum seekers, poverty and climbing financial inequity, gender inequality, violence against women and children, homophobia and transphobia, and the treatment of people with mental ill health and disabilities are merely some of the issues that demand our attention. We require creative solutions to respond to these often interwoven issues.

The outcome of this research is the establishment of a framework for engaged yoga. This framework consists of two main components *self responsibility* and *meaningful actions*. These two components were identified as the foundation for engaged yoga, as observed in this research. In this research the word ‘engaged yoga’ refers to the emerging trend of yoga connected to social justice and human rights activism. Self-responsibility demonstrates that engaged yoga serves as a foundation for contemplation, healing and inner sustenance. Often approaches to human rights and social justice place the ‘other’ as central. However, engaged yoga, in this research places the activist’s life as central to the performance of activism. The case studies were imbued with the experience of transformation– this is ultimately the process through which we become more able to understand the human experience. The components examined were framed through the overall approach of responsibility for self, and then divided into the

components of becoming empowered agents of change, yoga as a sustaining tool for activism, recovery from suffering: mental ill health and trauma and entwining spiritual beliefs.

From *self-responsibility*, the focus of engaged yoga moves to *meaningful actions*. This focus positions engaged yoga as a variety of yoga that is connected to the pursuit of contemporary human rights. The case study participants, within this research actively demonstrated their interpretation of human rights as a grounded and everyday activity, within which they use the practices of yoga as tools to inform their teaching. The components demonstrated as part of engaged yoga were as follows: leading others towards embodiment, healing scars with trauma-sensitive yoga teaching, drawing on anti-oppressive practice principles, redefining the role of the yoga teacher, and building communities of engaged yoga.

This small-scale study provides a workable framework upon which to understand the intersection of yoga and human rights through an emerging approach known as engaged yoga. I am grateful for the case study participants' generous sharing of their activism and, at times, the intimate details of their lives. I have drawn strength from their words and pored over the details of their encounters with engaged yoga. This has had a series of significant outcomes for me, and I am privileged to be able to share them in this research. I hope their inspiration enhances all our commitments to human rights activism.



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When I moved to Perth in 2007, I looked for courses that I thought may be of interest to me. I quickly found the Centre for Human Rights Education (CHRE) at Curtin University. I enrolled in a master's degree there and, once that was completed, began this thesis. CHRE has now been my academic home for 10 whole years. I consider it an incredible privilege to be able to pursue my love of learning and burgeoning interest in research alongside other individuals who inspire, support and challenge me. I thank all the staff at the CHRE for their collegiality over all the years. Dr Caroline Fleay, Dr Lisa Hartley, Dr Yirga Woldeyes and Gaylene Galardi—thank you! Of course, as well as some of the staff at the centre, there have been so many students with whom I have studied over the years. Thank you so much for contributing to my learning and teaching me so much about your cultures, lives and countries. An incredible melting pot of people study human rights, and the diversity of our world is always well represented at the CHRE.

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# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

From a young age, I knew I wanted to ‘change the world’. Of course, as I have matured, I have come to view this as an ongoing pursuit that may have no end. However, despite a more mature approach to what this means, the same compulsion still burns in me, and I will not relinquish this idealistic view. I hope now to add to my youthful idealism, based on my experience, skills and failures. More than anything, I have experience of healing and coming more closely into connection with ‘self’ and ‘other’. I know I am not alone in this pursuit, and reminding myself regularly remains one of my deepest motivations. The words of Ulluwishewa resonate with me and I believe summarise what I know to be central to engaged yoga:

The world urgently needs such a transformation; a transformation from self-centredness to selflessness, from greed to generosity, from disharmony to harmony, from hate to love and from ‘I’ to ‘We’. This is spiritual transformation. No external force can bring such a transformation to the world. It can only come from inner transformation in individuals (p. 23, 2015).

As this thesis unfolds, these words guide the way. I believe the work of change to be more humble than I once believed. I rejoice in small change and successes. I am patient and expect less.

## **1.1 Changes since Starting the Thesis**

It has become increasingly difficult and almost impossible to keep track of the rate of growth of engaged yoga. What began six years ago as an obscure topic in academia and a fringe topic in the yoga community has changed into a vibrant area of growth, particularly within the yoga community. During this time, the United Nations named an International Day of Yoga, which has significantly contributed to the discussion and dialogue of yoga as a tool for transformational growth and an expression of activism. Trauma-sensitive yoga has become a known part of mental health treatment, with one of the major inpatient hospitals in Perth recently contacting me for information about the way yoga can support people who are working to recover from trauma.

I began this thesis in 2012 and, since this time, there has been acceleration in the overall interest in yoga and related research. Despite this acceleration, the area is still in its



infancy. Research on yoga related to human rights, social justice and social action is still in its inception stages. To my knowledge, there has been no research derived identification of the components that comprise what is referred to in this thesis as ‘engaged yoga’, until now. However, within the field, there has been an incredible upsurge in attempts to draw yoga and human rights together into programs, training, action-oriented activism, writing and opinion pieces.

Most prevalent are the numbers of yoga teachers and yoga practitioners who are actively speaking and engaged in activism. This is evidenced through a growing emphasis on issues such as colonisation and racism being tackled within yoga organisations. For example, in 2015, Yoga Australia began the journey of making a reconciliation plan with Aboriginal Elders across Australia. This marked a formal recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People as the original custodians of Australia, and marked formal recognition of their ongoing recognition in full dignity under law and society within Australia.

Across Australia, there have been numerous conferences and workshops targeting specific social issues faced by people in Australia. A small yet visible growth has been noted in yoga programs that are reaching into marginalised and vulnerable communities also. There has been increased discussion in media and journals regarding the role of yoga as a potential avenue for social change and a catalyst for enhancing relatedness between groups and communities. There has been an observable increase in dialogue acknowledging that yoga in its fullest expression should focus on both the inner realm of individuals and the social conditions of their environment. There have become some active leaders in the areas of ‘body positive’ yoga, as well as many collaborations between not-for-profit, community and private enterprises to tackle social issues, such as access to yoga-related services.

Within the United States (US), there is even more prominent recognition of the potential for and place of the role of yoga in the space of social justice. There are now many teacher training opportunities for yoga teachers and the yoga community, covering issues such as racism, white privilege and poverty. Yoga is offered throughout many mainstream settings, including prisons, hospitals and community facilities. There are regular conferences around the US that seek to explore yoga as a transformative practice of the self and community. For example, the US has a number of leading groups in this

area, such as the Yoga and Body Image Coalition, the Yoga Service Council, and South Asian American Perspectives on Yoga in America.

During the writing of this thesis, the author, jointly published the following paper in a peer reviewed journal:

O'Hare, K Marinova, D (2013) '*Sharing common ground: human rights discourse and the practice of yoga*', Transformations, vol. 3-4, no. 78-79, pp. 232-249. A declaration is provided labelled, Appendix 1, which outlines the role of Dora Marinova's input in the authorship of this article.

Just prior to handing in this thesis, there have been considerable concerns raised in the international yoga community, in regards to yoga teachers and inappropriate touching, sexual harassment, rape and other violence (McGregor 2017 & Rain 2017). This is a long overdue conversation and one that I suspect will be difficult. However these kinds of disclosures and the subsequent responses from the community are indicative of the emergence of a new consciousness regarding social justice and human rights. Being able to shine a light within the community to look at power dynamics and abuse masquerading, as teaching and demand accountability will take significant time.

## **1.2 Aim of This Study**

The purpose of this research was to explore the study participants' relationship between their experiences of yoga practice and their understanding of human rights. This situates human rights as a reflexive and embodied understanding of human relationships. The research question was as follows:

How do yoga practitioners with an interest in human rights describe the connection between their practice of yoga and their practice of human rights?

The research objectives were as follows:

- explore the ways that yoga supports the practice of sustained activism
- explore the ways that yoga practitioners' self-enquiry manifests in understanding relationships and interconnectedness with human rights

- explore the ways in which yoga communities may operate as activist communities of human rights—that is, examine their ideas about the use of yoga as human rights activism.

### 1.3 Prelude to Research

Yoga is a term that conjures images ranging from cave-dwelling men with long beards to Lycra-worthy physiques stretched into spectacular positions. Given the extremes in these descriptions, it is pertinent to acknowledge early that yoga encompasses a considerable range of practices, such as the spiritual practice from the Indian subcontinent to the health and wellbeing phenomenon that has exploded across the developed world. These interpretations of yoga are affected by the era, geographic location, context and practice (Singleton & Byrne 2008; Strauss 2005). Strauss (2005) claimed that yoga can be described as an attitude, a philosophy, a set of practices and a way of being in the world. The Sanskrit root for the term ‘yoga’ means to ‘yoke’ or ‘join together’—in the English language, this is often translated as ‘union’ (Iyengar 2001). This union is most usually attributed to the union of self with the absolute or universal self (Iyengar 2001). The *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali (written between 200 BC and 200 AD) are verses referred to as the foundations of classical yoga, and considered the guiding texts from which classical yoga is understood. The *Yoga Sutras* give an account of the *pada* (footsteps) to be taken on the journey to *atman* (consciousness) (Chennakesavan 1992). The traditions of yoga can be linked to the four cornerstones of *Bhakti*, *Karma*, *Jnana* and *Tantra* yoga (Strauss 2005).

Yoga can be found in many parts of the contemporary world and is ‘unobtrusively but visibly expanding’ (De Michelis, cited in Singleton & Byrne 2008, p. 17). In the West, the focus of yoga is on health and wellbeing, as reflected in the reasons that people adopt yoga as a practice. The uptake of yoga for medical purposes is significantly divergent from the ancient traditions of yoga, whereby yoga was practised as a spiritual path.

The growing focus on yoga as a physical practice of postural forms in Western democracies such as Australia is receiving substantial critique (Berila, Klein & Roberts 2016). This critique is largely focused on the idea of yoga as a practice that benefits individuals’ health and wellbeing, with little attention devoted to the possible spiritual

aspects of yoga practice. For example, Shapiro (2011) stated that modern yoga is ‘a highly processed and marketed form of hygiene and therapeutic knowledge-body practice for the contemporary subject within an age of rampant neoliberalism’. The influences of social Darwinism and eugenics have also affected the practice of modern yoga (Singleton 2010). The effect of these factors is that yoga is viewed as a ‘fast track to physical and spiritual perfection’ (Singleton 2010, p. 135), as opposed to the more traditional goal of yoga as an experience of liberation from the cycle of birth and death, or reunion with Brahman. Singleton (2010, p. 81) asserted that what is now considered modern postural yoga ‘came into being in the first half of the twentieth century as a hybridized product of colonial India’s dialogical encounter with the worldwide physical culture movement’. He further argued that the primacy of *asana* was never a predominant part of classical yoga practice, as it has become today (Singleton 2010). With this rich history, some argue that there is no one true yoga. It is instead described as a plethora of practices, meanings and understandings that are as diverse as its practitioners (Strauss 2005).

In this current surge of neoliberalism, Rose (1990) argued that the primary economic image is not of producer, but of consumer. As consumers, we shape our lives with our purchasing power and purchasing choice. We make meaning of our lives and give our lives identity through selecting a personal lifestyle from those on offer:

We are obliged to make our lives meaningful by selecting our personal lifestyle from those offered to us in advertising, soap operas, and films to make sense of our existence by exercising our freedom to choose in a market in which one simultaneously purchases products and services, and assembles, manages and markets oneself (Rose 1990, p. 102).

Yoga does not escape such commodification. However, despite the commercialisation of yoga, numerous practitioners remain committed to yoga as a spiritual practice. Of interest to this research are yoga practitioners who engage in yoga practice as a part of their commitment to human rights, and bringing these two realms into dialogue.

One example of this is the Yoga Day for Human Rights, which began in 2009 in Ottawa. This day has rapidly expanded and become one of Amnesty International Canada’s most prominent days of national activism. Yoga Day for Human Rights includes simultaneous practice of yoga across community centres and studios around

Canada, with the intention of raising consciousness and funds for global human rights. In 2010 and 2011, buoyed by the success of Amnesty International's Yoga Day for Human Rights, various Amnesty International branches in Australia incorporated yoga sessions as a part of their '16 Days of Activism' campaigns. Amnesty International is one of the leading global human rights organisations; thus, their involvement indicates the growing prominence of yoga as a practice of human rights.

Another example of the growing influence of yoga in human rights initiatives is Yoga Aid—a global initiative of yoga practitioners. Through Yoga Aid, yoga practitioners with a commitment to human rights dedicate their practice to raise money for not-for-profit organisations. This organisation has a focus on local yoga practitioners raising funds for local charities concerned with social justice and human rights. Another example is the work of Off the Mat Into the World. This global not-for-profit organisation's purpose is to 'use the power of yoga to inspire conscious sustainable activism and ignite grassroots social change' (Off the Mat Into the World 2009). Off the Mat Into the World has inspired projects in Los Angeles, such as the development of a yoga program with a youth shelter that supports adolescents engaged in prostitution.

Moreover, not for profits such as the Olive Tree Yoga Foundation has a mission to bring unity, strength and possibility to Israelis and Palestinians through the practice of yoga. Olive Tree Yoga focuses on relationship building with community leaders and existing yoga studios in both Palestine and Israel. Growing support from both Israeli and Palestinian yoga communities led to a plan in early 2012 to open the first joint yoga studio for Palestinian and Israeli yoga practitioners.

In another example, Dr Melody Moore has drawn together her experiences in clinical psychology and yoga practices to develop the Embody Love Movement, an organisation dedicated to supporting young women to celebrate beauty from the inside out, and to make meaningful contributions to the world around them. Focusing on community-led activism that is both personal and political, this organisation exemplifies the changing landscape of both yoga and human rights.

The projects listed above draw together the practice of yoga and the realm of human rights. It remains unclear which is the driving practice—the practice of human rights or the practice of yoga. This emerging intersection of yoga and human rights—that I refer

to as ‘engaged yoga’—appears to have connection with the spiritual wisdom of yoga as a process of transformation. Understanding that engaged yoga has multiple components is a significant driver of this research.

## **1.4 Significance of This Research**

This study is significant for multiple reasons. As discussed above, there appears to be a growing trend of connecting the practice of yoga and human rights. However, despite this growth, there has been no rigorously conducted empirical research to explore this area. Yoga has most often been researched as either a historical or an ancient phenomenon (Strauss 2005). More recently, there has also been some interest in researching yoga for biomedical applications for health and wellbeing (Conrad 1994). However, this research does not appear to consider the spiritual perspectives and potentiality of yoga. Further, given the unprecedented popularity of yoga today, there is a need for research that seeks to understand its appeal—not only as a commodified practice of the ‘self’, but also, more significantly, in terms of the ways in which this practice can become a transformative process, where issues of social justice, human rights and equality become central for individuals.

Human rights have historically been located in the domains of law, politics and international relations; thus, they are understood as an area for rationalist and positivist enquiry (Meckled-Garcia & Cali 2006). However, there has long been commitment to bettering the human condition, and this may have previously been explored through avenues such as religion and politics (Evans 2007). *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* provides the predominantly accepted framework in Western democracies with which to make sense of human rights in the contemporary world (Taylor 1996). There is significant support for a universal understanding of human rights; however, there are counterclaims that international treaties and conventions are not compatible with all cultural and religious beliefs and societies (Teson 2001), and there is an on-going and vexed debate about the applicability of human rights. My assertion is that human rights represent a dialogue that is central to the wellbeing of all humans, more so now than ever. To keep this dialogue alive and relevant, we must seek ways to connect with each other in openhearted relationships. There must be space made to heal relationships that have been ruptured because of conflict, violence and trauma. Human rights must be reconstructed as an action-oriented and applicable endeavour. It should

not sit apart from activism. Rather, the central aim of human rights education must be empowering activism and sustained change through grassroots actions.

This research is situated amid the on-going conjecture about the nature of human rights. While there are no empirical data to support the relationship between human rights and yoga practice, there is clearly a space in human rights discourse that supports alternative and counter-cultural understandings of human rights. There also appears to be a growing number of diverse organisations that are practising engaged yoga in dynamic forms. These two factors provide the basis for the significance of this research project. I assert that the interplay that is currently being demonstrated in the yoga community—in the specific locations in which the case study participants are located—is demonstrative of what appears to be engaged yoga, which I anticipate to follow a similar approach to engaged Buddhism.

Yoga has melded with the communities in which it is practised, forming itself based on new knowledge, ideas, cultural landscapes and identities. Recently, in Australia and the US, yoga has collided with the emergence of globalised understandings of human relatedness that are referred to as ‘human rights’. This has proved a potent mix for a dynamic approach to human rights activism. This research uncovers the way these two areas appear to be interacting and developing a new creative approach to deal with the complexities of our shared challenges.

## **1.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the content of the thesis, the central research questions, some of my preliminary thoughts in this area and the significance of researching the components of engaged yoga. From here, the thesis moves to Chapter 2, which focuses on demonstrating the research process of this thesis.

## **Chapter 2: Illuminating the Research Methodology and Methods**

This chapter focuses on the research methodology and associated methods that contributed to the way this research was undertaken to develop this thesis. Due credit is given to the philosophies, practices and process within which this framework was drawn together to develop in a practical sense into research design. Emphasis on the process is included to develop a sense of the lived and experiential nature of this research. The research methodology for this project is multifaceted, and I conceptualise it as being an unfolding process that was carefully developed through knowledge and experience of the subject material over the course of the research.

The methodology and methods used are a mixture of approaches. To draw this together, I have chosen to illustrate the methodology with a photograph on the following page. This photograph was taken in my home in 2014, and shows me in *adho mukha svanasana*, commonly known as ‘downward facing dog’. I chose this image to give a ‘vision’ to my ‘voice’ in this research. As I explain the research methodology and associated design in this chapter, I invite you to reflect on the symbolism of this photograph.

This chapter outlines the specifics of the research approach and design, thereby addressing both the ‘why’ of the research design and the ‘how’ of the research process. The ‘why’ of this research investigates the research methods that I employed in this thesis. I situate the research questions within the qualitative field, drawing on lived experience or phenomenology. This is narrowed into a case study approach, with an emphasis on rich textual understanding. Articulating the ‘why’ covers the basis for the research approach, establishing this research as a qualitative, phenomenological case study and auto-ethnography method. With this established, the chapter then outlines the details of the research to offer a thorough explanation of the way the research was undertaken.

The specific topics discussed include developing the research questions, identifying the participants, collecting the case studies, recording the data and undertaking the data analysis processes. These details provide an overview of the data recorded in Chapter 5.



Underscoring the ‘how’ and ‘why’ is my own relationship to the research process and my unfolding understanding of myself as a researcher.



**Figure 2.1: Photograph of the Researcher in *Adho Mukha Svanasana***

## **2.1 Qualitative Basis for the Research**

The foundation of this research was the qualitative paradigm. Central to this research enquiry was understanding the way in which the participants experienced a similar set of circumstances or phenomena. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, I had been immersed in both the human rights and yoga communities for over a decade, without really connecting these interests to myself in any tangible way. After completing a Master's Degree in Human Rights at Curtin University, I noticed that the initial questions I had sought to answer remained unfulfilled, and the only real way I was experiencing any satisfaction—particularly as it related to this quandary—was through my explorations in yoga. I understood that human rights were a lived experience; however, I could not connect with my lived experience of human rights. I keenly felt that I was missing a piece of the jigsaw, and was motivated to discover what this could be.

Initially through internet searches, I began to observe a few examples of how yoga and human rights were being drawn into dialogue. I was curious to understand more about this emerging phenomenon as experienced by others; I was interested in other people's motivations, stories and life experiences. These beginning musings lent themselves to undertaking qualitative enquiry. The interpretive or qualitative paradigm is foundational to studying humans because it is possible to gain holistic insights, descriptions and contexts for the research. Researchers must consider their overall research aims and choose the best approach to apply to their investigation (Ticehurst & Veal 2000). The research paradigm and methodological considerations are most adequately developed with an understanding of the research phenomena (Ellram 1996; Morgan & Smircich 1980). Research is not an abstract, disconnected process. Rather, I understand research to be an embedded and meaningful collaboration between the subject matter and participants. Specifically in relation to this research, I sought an approach that could adequately capture the type of connection to the data in which I was interested. My focus on the lived experience and practice of yoga highlighted that the research design needed to be able to capture these topics. Phenomenology and yoga have been drawn together through the words of embodiment, and thus make a compelling coupling for research (Morley 2001). The following words by Morley highlight the fusion of the study of yoga, phenomenology and Western philosophy in a useful connection. This is

the focus of the current research project, and was crucial to the process of research design:

Yoga is an important resource for the phenomenologists undertaking future research ongoing project prescribed by Merleau-Ponty; namely to bring Western thought down to earth by focussing on the lived human body as philosophical and psychological ground (2001 p. 79).

I believed that studying human rights through understanding yoga was best suited to an approach embedded in phenomenology. The participants' lived experience was captured in an in-depth manner through qualitative and case study processes. The following discussion depicts the more nuanced way that I achieved this in the research design.

Qualitative research is a set of interconnected terms, concepts, assumptions, methodologies and methods (Denzin & Lincoln 2008; Flick 2007; Saldana 2011). The process is neither linear nor prescriptive, thereby enabling the research to become a dynamic and empowering process between the researcher and the researched. Saldana offered a generic definition of qualitative research:

Qualitative research is an umbrella term for a wide variety of approaches to and methods for the study of natural social life. The information or data collected and analysed is primarily (but not exclusively) non-quantitative in character, consisting of textual materials (2011, p. 3).

This offers a broad scope within which to begin a qualitative enquiry. Additionally, Thorne explained:

Qualitative researchers accept that the goal of science is to discover truths that exist in the world and to use the scientific method as a way to build a more complete understanding of reality. Although some qualitative researchers operate from a similar philosophical position, most recognise that the relevant reality as far as human experience is concerned is that which takes place in subjective experience, in social context, and in historical time. Thus, qualitative researchers are often more concerned about uncovering knowledge about how people think and feel about the circumstances in which they find themselves than they are in making judgements about whether those thoughts and feelings are valid (2000, p. 69).

From this broad perspective of qualitative enquiry, I began the process of refining the research philosophy. Specifically, this research project focused on how the participants described the intertwined experience of yoga and human rights, using their own words and through their own experience. This line of questioning drew on the lived experience of individuals, and sits firmly in the foundations of phenomenology (Embree 1997; Pollio, Henlye & Thompson 1997). A focus on lived experience resonated with me, as I wanted the research outcomes to be practical and useful to the students who come after me. I could also see that the case study participants in whom I was interested spoke very personally and included the ‘self’ in their work. Given that this is an emerging field, there was very little direction regarding how to undertake the research. Therefore, the research was designed to be flexible and broad to encompass the areas that I expected to be significant. In this manner, phenomenology is not an explicit methodology (Barnacle 2001). There are no specific instructions regarding how to perform the enquiry; rather, it provides a basis upon which to rest the entire research framework. Phenomenology is constantly expanding to encompass new ground and ways of knowing. It has expanded into a multitude of subsets and frameworks. As such, it is a dynamic research philosophy that is capable of growth and inclusion (Barnacle 2001).

## **2.2 Focusing on Lived Experience with Phenomenology**

In the simplest terms, phenomenology is often described as a focus on description, rather than explanation. In Creswell’s (2007) definition, a phenomenological study describes the meaning of several individuals’ lived experiences of a concept or phenomena. The researcher collects descriptions from people who have experienced engaged yoga (referred to in this chapter as the ‘phenomena’) and begins to analyse these descriptions to condense and merge them into a commonly described experience. Shared descriptions and experiences are central to the phenomenology tradition, and, from these shared descriptions, the researcher aims to capture the essence of the experience as described to them. From this lived experience, the researcher then draws the data together—merging, layering and blending until the themes of the research are obtained. In this research I anticipated that these themes would become the components of the framework of Engaged Yoga.

As the research began to unfold, I became aware that the human condition was at the heart of this enquiry. Therefore, I began to develop the phenomenological dimension of

the framework to include existential phenomenology. The exploration of themes pertaining to ‘the human condition’ was described by von Eckartsberg (1998) as existential phenomenology. This additional layer became beneficial as I began to formulate the structure of the research and finally the layout of the thesis. From this point, the next crucial step was identifying the process methodology to gather data relating to these phenomena. After significant comparison with multiple qualitative methods, I selected case study analysis as the method. Case study, such as phenomenology, lends itself to answering ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions, and places into context ‘conditions because they may be relevant to the phenomena’ (Yin 1994, 2003; Gillham 2000). Case studies are tailor-made to explore new or little understood processes and behaviours (Hartley 1994). As previously discussed, this phenomenon has been given scant research attention, and subsequently qualifies as appropriate ground for a case study. Case studies can be embedded in multiple approaches, which include phenomenology. The phenomenological case study approach focuses on the way the case experiences the phenomena under scrutiny (Stacks 1995).

### **2.3 Phenomenological Case Study Methodology**

Gillham suggested that, when describing case study, it is important to begin with a definition of case. He stated that a case is:

- a unit of human activity embedded in the real world;
  - which can only be studied or understood in context;
  - which exists here and now;
  - that merges in with its context so that precise boundaries are difficult to draw
- (2000, p. 1).

He suggested that the case study investigation may include individuals, organisations or communities, and that it is one that merges the case with the purpose of seeking answers to a set of research questions (Gillham 2000). Merriam asserted that the ‘defining characteristic of case study research lies in the delimiting the object of the study, the case’ (2009, p. 40). For this study, I selected the case study methodology because of its ability to incorporate multiple possibilities for data collection around a particular unit of analysis over an extended period. This was a significant advantage for this enquiry because, even in the short time I had spent observing this phenomena, I had noticed a

significant increase in discussion and interest through social media and website content. Thus, I wished to be able to capture some of this unfolding interest.

There are multiple ways to conceptualise a qualitative case study methodology. For this enquiry, I chose multiple case analysis because this enabled many participants to be involved in the research, thereby adding to a rich and textual description. It also enabled some comparison of the phenomena, as described from multiple perspectives. Robson (1993) stated that there are four areas of case study methodology that require consideration: the theoretical framework, research questions, sampling strategy and instruments of data collection. The theoretical framework for the research was covered in the previous chapter, while the other areas are described in the following sections.

## **2.4 Becoming an Auto-ethnographic Researcher**

Initially, I began the research by focusing on not-for-profit organisations and international development agencies that had commenced to unite yoga and human rights. However, around this same time, particular circumstances in my life demanded addressing. Underlying the premise of most research is a set of beliefs. Primarily, the researcher cannot mix methodologies or use conflicting methodologies. The methodology must be clearly defined before embarking on the research, and the research must fit the methodology—as a linear process (Higgs, Byrne-Armstrong & Horsfall 2001). While clearly a beginner at research, I quickly acknowledged that what I was experiencing was not so clear-cut.

Of course, in the earliest stages of this project, I fully subscribed to this thinking. Additionally, I believed that, while I shared interests in these phenomena with other participants, that would be the extent of my personal lived experience of this research. I expected the research experience to have a clear line between self and other. However, as I began to immerse myself in the research process of formulating questions and finding participants, I started to notice changes in my understanding of my journey into these fields. As I contemplated these ideas, I came into contact with the traumatic delayed effect of early childhood abuse, including emotional and sexual abuse. As a result, my life came to a standstill. I experienced severe anxiety, somatisation, depression, suicidal ideation and other trauma symptoms. Consequently, I had to undergo intensive counselling and began taking anti-depressant and anti-anxiety

medication. I also undertook a research break. However, while I was on this ‘break’, the project very much continued. I spoke with my psychologist and began to feel all the emotions and pain that I had blocked over the years. The dialogue I was interested in researching was occurring within me. When I was very depressed, there were few things I could cling to, yet this realisation was one of them. It was part of my lifeline. As I gradually moved beyond a state of delayed catastrophic shock and eventually returned to the research process, I did so knowing that I was fully invested in the lived experience of research. I had initially believed research to be a sanitised process, yet now experienced the process as murky and muddled. ‘I’ was now central—not as a casual observer, but as an agent in creating this research.

In this critical moment, I changed from simply performing research to experiencing research (Higgs, Byrne-Armstrong & Horsfall 2001). I was also completely challenged by the research to relinquish the sanitised and preferred version of myself. My preferred version was much like the aforementioned subscription to mainstream thinking about research. I had subscribed to the view that, although I had experienced catastrophic childhood sexual and emotional abuse, this had not affected me in any significant way—there was a distinct separation. This critical moment in my research and lived experience changed my self-understanding. Although ashamed of my past experiences of abuse, I made the decision to include some of these experiences in this thesis to honour the journey. As such, I added auto-ethnography to my established framework of existential phenomenological philosophy through a multiple case study methodology.

The work of auto-ethnography involves both the process and the product. Researchers use the analysis of their life experiences to describe and understand cultural experiences (Denzin 2014; Ellis 2009; Ellis & Bochner 2002; Holman-Jones, Adams & Ellis 2013). Ellis offered the following description of the process of auto-ethnography:

As an auto-ethnographer, I am both the author and the focus of the story, the one who tells and the one who experiences, the observer and the observed ... I am the person at the intersection of the personal and the cultural thinking and observing as an ethnographer and writing and describing as a story teller (2009, p. 13).

This leaves an open scope within which to begin to experience research. Saldana’s (2011) description of auto-ethnography is the one to which I am largely drawn, and is a description of the auto-ethnographic experience. Saldana stated that ‘auto-ethnography

is reflexive, cultural reporting or self, most often narrative ... the author incorporates the “I” into research and writing yet analyses herself as studying another’ (2011, p. 17). This continual flow between subject, object, researcher and researched establishes the possibility of growth for the researcher, far beyond the papery world where research is situated. To incorporate my own experiences into the study, I began to interact with the research and to allow the learning to make its way into my life.

Auto-ethnographic research is reflexive by nature; however, I also felt that I would include reflexivity in my research methodology to adequately demonstrate that the reflective nature of this enquiry was not limited to the auto-ethnographic component of the research. Therefore, reflexivity is central to this research methodology framework. I consider reflexivity the thread that joins this framework together. Reflexivity was described by Steedman as follows: ‘knowledge cannot be separated from the knower’ (1991, p. 36). Thus, knowledge production is contextualised through the researcher. Reflexivity in research is the practice of observing one’s own experiences, reactions and assumptions of the research (Etherington 2004). This highlights that the ‘self’ in research is in a process of flux, and this state of change is reflected in the research (Higgs, Byrne-Armstrong & Horsfall 2001). To find a more reflexive and authentic voice in my research, I implemented several different methods to cultivate this within myself. These are further outlined in the section about methods for data collection.

## **2.5 Designing the Research**

Well-designed qualitative research is reliable and valid when the researcher adopts multiple methods of data collection (Denzin and Lincoln 2008). Initially, I could not claim that my reasons for using multiple methods of data collection were based on data validity. However, as I began to develop a reflexive approach to the study, I observed that I was ‘gathering data’ well beyond the reach of my original and structured research methods. It took some time before I was able to consider using my rich personal experience as my research unfolded. I included these personal data for many reasons. One of the most compelling reasons for including personal reflection was because my answers were so unexpected. I was truly discovering something about myself, which indicated the emerging researcher in me.



In this research project, the data providing the basis for the case studies were generated from the following sources:

- in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nine individuals
- reading and analysis of written materials, including books, articles and participants' blogs
- undertaking two online workshops run by the participants and one face-to-face week-long series of workshops with the research participants
- undertaking a two-year immersion course in the practice and teaching of yoga at the Yoga Space West Perth, and becoming part of a community of yoga practitioners
- committing to daily practice of Ashtanga yoga and teaching yoga classes
- completing a six-week field trip to Mysore, India—the hometown of Ashtanga yoga—to study intensively with Sharath Rangaswamy, Master Teacher at the Shri K Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Institute
- completing a formal nine-day intensive teacher training course in mindfulness-based stress reduction with the University of Massachusetts.

The in-depth semi-structured interviews; reading of websites, articles and books; and participation in training were the basis of the nine individual case studies from which I drew the bulk of the data. These interviews and readings provided the data that became the case studies. In addition, I completed a process that was parallel and intertwined with the above approaches. This parallel approach to undertaking the research involved my personal experience of the phenomena discussed in the research, which further illuminated my understanding of the subject matter. The outcomes not only involved understanding, but also the integration of complex trauma.

In addition to the other methods of data collection, immersion in the yoga community, becoming a registered yoga teacher, travelling to India to learn yoga, and participating in training in Beijing were all processes that provided me with data for the auto-ethnographic component of my research. As well as helping me understand myself, this increased immersion in the field provided me with a deeper understanding of and resonance with the fieldwork. These additional trainings and teachings were pivotal because I understood the practices of yoga and human rights to be personal. I intuited that, to understand the research question, I had to fully engage in the process of

becoming and experimenting with embodied and lived ways of engaging with this subject. These processes helped me develop my relationship with the experience in an embodied, integrated and personal manner. Without these actions, I wonder whether I would have been left with the same nagging feeling of incompleteness that I experienced after completing my master's degree. I consider this learning to be transformative and essential in understanding the way that I became able to ground my knowledge into a lived expression.

The daily yoga, counselling techniques and mindfulness interventions I learnt were life-saving. Without these, I shudder to consider my mental and physical health. I collated auto-ethnographic material in a diary that included thoughts, attitudes, feelings and epiphanies. This helped me observe how my motivations, interests and analysis of the subject matter changed with my new understandings. This supported me in the conclusion that this research was dynamic and yet subject to a certain time and place. I knew that, if I conducted the same experiment again, I would likely be influenced by different factors, knowledge and interests, and this would be reflected in the research outcome.

Of course, I was insecure at the outset of integrating myself openly into the research. I wondered if this would mean the research would be considered too 'navel gazing'—an issue of which auto-ethnography is often accused (Holman-Jones, Adams & Ellis 2016). There were two points that influenced my thinking. First, I had been deeply motivated prior to these revelations, even though the drivers (which I believe to be my own healing of trauma) had been subconscious. This meant that I had very little say regarding the manner in which this was directing the research process. I felt that conscious inclusion of myself in the research was less complex and confusing than when I first began the research project. The second point was more synchronistic than conceptual. In my yoga practice, I learnt the traditional gaze points (referred to as *drishti*) for all of the postures, and was interested to discover that the traditional gaze point for downward dog requires a focus on one's own navel. If I were to be navel gazing, then so be it. It seemed a perfect fit.

## **2.6 Identifying Participants**

To select participants I used the process of purposive sampling to find a cohort of participants who could offer rich descriptions and experience to illuminate the research questions (Denver & Frankel 2000). Denver and Frankel (2000) advocated a three-tiered approach to purposive sampling to ensure there is variety and depth to the data. These tiers include the provision of the following considerations:

- cases that are considered ‘typical’ of the phenomena
- cases that may be considered deviant or extreme in relation to the phenomena
- cases that are negative and disconfirming of the phenomena.

I initially encountered a very small field of people who represented the phenomena. I began by searching the internet for organisations that in some way related yoga and human rights. There were a few organisations that were immediately illustrative of this concept in a contemporary manifestation of human rights and yoga. Gradually, as the research focus became sharper, the phenomena changed from an organisational perspective to an individual perspective.

By conducting internet searches, I located a small group of people who were writing, engaging in activism, teaching and actively working in both the human rights and yoga fields. I sought out participants who demonstrated the combined concept of what I thought to be an emerging practice of engaged yoga through their published work, interviews, training and teaching. This process identified an initial interest in the fields of yoga and human rights. The conceptual framework for the study was situated in Western liberal thought and included the contemporary influx of yoga into a Western setting. Therefore, I sought to find research participants from locations that shared these ideals. Research participants were selected from Australia, New Zealand and the United States (US). From here, I began to sort the participants into the tiered approach of Denver and Frankel (2000) to build some diversity in the group.

Initially, I identified a select group of six individual participants as case studies; however, this eventually became 10 individuals, including me as a case study. The selection of a small number of cases reflects the emergence of this field of study. There were very few available individuals who fit the criteria. This has significantly expanded

during the five years of undertaking this study, with many new interest groups and manifestations of this phenomena emerging. It is worth noting that the aim of this research was not to draw on a large pool of participants to generalise across a broader group. This research project aimed to establish these phenomena as an emerging area of practice and field of scholarly interest. Therefore, the number of participants reflected the aims of the study, and was also limited because of the number of people who were active, and the time restrictions associated with PhD work.

Selecting my research participants before completing the research design suggested that I had a clear view of my interviewees prior to establishing the aims and objectives of the study. In reality, I found that ‘who’ I would interview and questions of ‘what’ I wanted to know were intrinsically linked, and, as my investigation became clearer, I was able to identify a specific subset of participants who would be suitable. Initially, I approached individuals via email to ascertain their interest in being part of the research.

## **2.7 Compiling the Interview Questions**

To ensure that the data collection and overall research objectives of the study were connected, I established research questions specifically in relation to each of the objectives. Kumar (2011) suggested that, at the outset, researchers must implement a logical process of establishing a connection between the research aims and the interview questions. To complete the research questions, I used Kumar’s (2011) guidelines, as follows:

- consider the objectives of the study
- reflect on the associated research queries
- examine the information required
- formulate the questions based on the above.

The guiding research question focused on the relationship between practising yoga and human rights. From the outset, I felt that this was a dialogical relationship that was mutually enriching. As such, I formulated questions that enabled the participants to explore the way they related to both yoga and human rights, and to begin to draw these into dialogue in the interview setting. Using Kumar’s (2011) strategy, I captured some of the reflective process I undertook to develop the interview questions. This process

required me to be considerably comfortable with the theoretical and methodological premise of the project. I trialled a variety of different interview questions on a colleague with an interest in the area, which significantly helped me make changes to ensure ease of communication. Following a process of organisation and reflection, I deduced the following questions to support the outcomes that I sought for this research. I placed them in an order that seemed to have a logical flow and could be condensed into a narrative or case study with relative ease. These were the standard interview questions that I used in this research design:

1. What were the reasons that you started yoga?
2. In what ways has your practice evolved since you started?
3. What have been the most challenging obstacles in your personal practice?
4. What are some of the significant transformations that you have experienced since you developed a yoga practice?
5. What was it that drew you originally to human rights and social action?
6. Have your inner transformations (mentioned in Question 4) affected your human rights work? If so, how? The use of tangible examples would be very helpful here.
7. How has learning the practices of mindfulness and non-attachment changed your relationship to pain and suffering?
8. How do you perceive the relationship between suffering and compassion?
9. What can yoga offer the human rights field?

These questions were drawn together through the process I outlined previously, and were the basis of the in-depth interviews. The interview process was not rigid; however, most of the interviews followed a fairly straightforward approach that addressed these nine questions. Each interview concluded with the chance for participants to offer final comments or add further data.

## **2.8 Collecting the Participants' Experiences**

Engaging and interviewing the case study participants was an ongoing process. At the beginning of this project (in 2011), there was a very limited established online presence of networks or organisations demonstrating the phenomena in which I was interested. It took several months to locate (through desktop searches) individuals who identified

their own link between yoga and human rights practice and theory, through their writing, teaching or workshops.

Whenever I located a potential participant, I contacted them via email to start an initial conversation about being involved in the research process. From the point of initial interest and contact, I then emailed the approved Information for Participants Sheet (Appendix 2) and the Consent Form (Appendix 3) outlining the confidentiality provisions. I then worked to find suitable times to interview the participants.

Five people who I personally contacted were unable to participate in the research interviews. The reasons given for this included time and hectic personal schedules. In general, the participants were all regularly interviewed for magazines, books and the media, and I was required to initially make contact with their personal assistants to establish an interest. This occasionally caused the process of establishing interview timeslots to become lengthy.

## **2.9 Conducting the Interviews**

The main research method was the in-depth interviews conducted with the nine participants. These interviews took place over Skype or telephone (if an online option was not available), and each interview ranged from one hour to 2.5 hours in length. At the beginning of each interview, I gave the participants some additional information about the research and described the reasons for the interviews. I explained the research process, as well as some of my personal experiences of being a social worker and yoga practitioner. I began the interviews in this manner to establish an initial form of rapport. In general, each of the participants expressed gratitude for hearing some of my story and went on to share their stories with me.

The interviews were conducted via Skype or telephone, as well as one face-to-face interview in Perth. Skype or face-to-face interviewing was preferred; however, on occasion, participants did not have access to online options, and telephone was used instead. Each of the interviews was recorded using the Recordium app on an iPhone. However, after the first interview was conducted, I realised that I had not recorded the interview properly using this app. This was clearly a research disaster. Therefore, after this, I used the Recordium app as well as an Olympus digital voice recorder so that no other interviews were lost. In terms of the 'lost' recorded interview, I had made

significant notes throughout the interview, and then spent time immediately afterwards writing down what I remembered from each answer.

The interview recordings were saved onto my laptop as Media Player files, and were given a numerical identity. I used a transcription company to transcribe the numerically identified recordings from Media Player files to verbatim written reports. This company upheld the highest degree of confidentiality and storage for this process, and, after the transcriptions were sent to me, all files were deleted from their hardware. The interviews varied based on the participants' experiences, interests and personalities. With most participants, rapport was easy to establish based on common interests and passions. There were negligible difficulties for them in understanding the process of confidentiality. Given that most of these participants are interested in public speaking and teaching around their topic, they each supported being publically quoted.

## **2.10 Data Analysis**

I undertook a task-oriented process of data analysis. However, somewhere in the process of tasks, the data began to become stories—not only case studies, but also vital clues that appeared central to the research question. The data analysis process I used was a general thematic analysis process (Rubin & Rubin 2005). Given the abundance of information and intricacy about methodology, I was surprised to find significantly less guidance regarding the analysis of data. I used the framework for thematic analysis, which I then adapted to a generalised approach that contained the steps below (Bryman 2012). This was practical, was well outlined and clearly indicated the immersive process involved in analysing qualitative data:

1. Commence coding as soon as possible.
2. Read through the initial set of transcripts, field notes or documents without making any notes or attempting to interpret the data.
3. Read the data again—begin making notes about significant observations and use keywords expressed by the participants, or give them names to begin the coding process.
4. Generate a list of terms or names that may assist you to interpret and theorise the data.

5. Review codes. If you have two or more words or phrases, delete one of them. Look closely to see whether the developed codes are relevant to concepts and categories in the existing literature.
6. Consider more general theoretical understandings in relation to the codes and data. Begin constructing theoretical notions or concepts about the data.
7. Do not worry about generating too many codes initially. You can refine them later.
8. Data can be coded in more than one way.

I appreciated this step-by-step approach to data analysis and began to immerse myself in the data. I realised quickly that I would prefer the process of data analysis to be technology free, and instead employed hands-on immersion. Thus, over a period of three or four weeks, I converted my study into a creative pictorial display of the data. Words emerged to overlay other words to finally create meaningful themes. Much time was spent highlighting and then cutting out significant words, sentences or paragraphs from the data transcripts. I then grouped the findings under general themes. From there, I began to find more subtle layers and subgroups within the data, and again arranged the key findings into smaller subgroups. I recorded each of these findings into a Microsoft Word document under their category and subcategory, and then began to coherently draw the findings together. Themes eventually emerged that I compiled into a coherent story to share the research findings.

## **2.11 Ethical Framework for Research**

In accordance with research policy, my research was subjected to ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Curtin University. My ethics approval was granted on 21 November 2013, valid until 21 November 2017. As per requirements, the ethical approach to research was guided by the *Australian Code for Responsible Conduct of Research*. I completed the research integrity training at Curtin University in 2014.

In my initial contact email, each of the participants in the study was provided with a copy of the Ethics Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix 2). If they agreed to pursue the project, I forwarded them a copy of the Ethics Participant Consent (see Appendix 3). Prior to the interview, each participant emailed me a signed copy of this



consent form. At the beginning of the interviews, I asked them again for their consent to be interviewed and for the interviews to be recorded. Prior to the interview, the participants were given a copy of the approved interview questions to consider. There were no significant risks for the identified participants in the research process; therefore, no additional requirements for their safety were required.

One participant emailed only minutes before her interview to say that she would like to decline, as she believed she had a different idea of yoga to my own. I replied to her that I was interested in all views and that I was working in the role of researcher, and that all answers were equally valid. She then decided to continue with the interview.

All participants were given the opportunity to decide whether they would like to remain anonymous in the study or be named—either by their first name only or by their first name and surname. All participants consented to be named in the research, and for the research to use the name of their associated organisations.

## **2.12 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an overview of the methodology and methods used throughout this thesis. Qualitative existential phenomenology was situated as the underlying philosophy for the research methodology. This emphasised the importance of knowledge in the subjective and contextualised lived experiences of the case study participants. From here, I expanded the research into a multiple case study and auto-ethnographic research project. Using both of these approaches captured the essence of the phenomena as illuminated by the participants. Towards the end of this chapter, I outlined the task-oriented process, including the way I captured the data, the process for data analysis and ethical considerations. Interwoven into this chapter were some reflections on the process, during which my thinking began to change in relation to this research. I consider this context important because it allows the research to be both a process of understanding others and a process of understanding myself. On reflection, the impetus for this research came from my own need to understand certain issues more deeply. This may be the case for all research; however, because I consider this need for understanding to be central to the research question, it was useful to capture some of this within different chapters throughout this thesis.

From this chapter, the focus now shifts to the theoretical framework, which provides the context for the research questions and the eventual research conclusions. Chapter 3, the following chapter, is concerned with human rights from a contemporary perspective and within it is argued that this is a dynamic and creative area that often uses personal stories to frame the underlying message—which is ultimately a message of relationship building and repair. This construction of human rights allows for the emergence of engaged yoga not only as a spiritual practice, but also as a dynamic form of activism that is ready to meet the complex challenges facing human life at this time.

## **Chapter 3: Contemporary Approaches to Human Rights**

### **3.1 Chapter Overview**

When faced with shared global suffering, exemplified through conflict and instability and experienced through forms of oppression, discrimination and violence, we are, compelled to engage with this reality. A human rights approach in this thesis is founded on the notion that there must be an embracing of both critical and compassionate encounters with other human beings. This approach encompasses the breadth and depth of human relationships and wellbeing, and is ultimately recognition that, through activating individual agency, a human rights consciousness is enacted. The theoretical basis lends a critical component to the concerns, tensions and issues that exist within the human rights scope. As aforementioned, it is my observation that the practices of yoga have been drawn into contact with human rights, and this is explored in more depth in this chapter.

It is important to note that it is insufficient to simply ‘understand’ human rights as an abstract or distant concept. Creating human relatedness in full intellectual and heartfelt rigour is a process of experiential knowing, which is central to the project of human rights. My observation is that aspects of yoga are being explored as a potential avenue to understand the everyday experience of human rights. Given the popularity of yoga, it is ready to be explored by contemplators. However, yoga is not just ready—it is nimble and fits easily into multiple contexts. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

Given the state of human rights abuses globally, it is vital that human rights are reimagined as a practical endeavour. This chapter provides a theoretical discussion of human rights to establish a platform to analyse, interpret and understand the research case studies. The purpose here is to argue that human rights—as a well-established and respected framework for human coexistence—present the most compelling approach to educate, promote and understand human dignity, respect and wellbeing (Woldeyes 2017). Indeed, this thesis considers how yoga can offer an important means through which human dignity can be produced and sustained. I propose that there are concepts of human rights found implicitly in the practices of yoga, as mentioned in Chapter 1. In

addition to these concepts, yoga appears to provide a way to engage human rights by connecting with people and their experiences.

Ultimately, to be useful, particularly to those who are most vulnerable to human rights abuses, the intellectual aspects of human rights scholarship must be translated into action. There is a significant leap between theoretical knowledge and the action of activism in human rights. This area has been less vigorously understood and perhaps even viewed as secondary to knowledge about human rights. However, activating human rights is essential. For this activation to occur, the human rights need to be applicable to people in their everyday lives. Without this as a starting place, my concern is that the entire project of human rights will remain relegated to governments and institutional processes, and will subsequently be of little use to most people. This highlights why I am not interested in this research, to focus on a single definition of human rights or attempt a theoretical definitive. However, instead of this I argue that there are core concepts of human rights that should be considered. However as well as concepts, I argue that the focus now must be on action as central to contemporary human rights. Indeed the separation of core concepts associated with human rights and the taking of action or activism should never be considered as separate area. The only way change can occur will be through collective actions.

### **3.2 Human Rights as Relating to ‘Other’**

Human rights can most easily be described as an effort to understand the way in which human beings relate to each other. While the discussion of this relatedness has been dominated in recent times by Western liberal politics, international relations and legalistic mechanisms, it is necessary to examine ‘relationship’ more broadly than these fields. Limiting the way at relating is constructed limits accessibility and the way people contextualise human rights for themselves. Relatedness does not only involve intellectual enquiry. It must also be sufficiently inspiring to peak the interest of human beings—to convey what it is to suffer, heal, recover and love. Experiencing full expressions of our humanity must be central to human rights education and activism. Human rights educationalist Yirga Woldeyes articulated that including empathy in human rights education can ‘result in reconstituting ourselves, recreating who we are as human beings by looking at the world differently, by thinking and acting from the position of those who suffer (2017, p. 51). In this manner, human rights approaches

must engage the ‘full’ human through both the heart and mind to enable deeper experiences of relationships. The road to empathic encounter is characteristically diverse and can be considered a literal expression of the human spirit in action. Continual emphasis on thinking *about* relatedness does not provide adequate scope to address such complex issues as genocide, human trafficking, gender-based violence and asylum seeker refusal. It cannot provide the scope needed to enable forgiveness, peacefulness and healing to be cultivated. It is vital that, within the scope of human rights theory, this deeply personal encounter with ‘other’ is captured in a way that promotes wholeness of understanding. It is vital that, in a world so often heavy with the weight of imminent and dystopian tragedy, stories of hope are shared and heard (Woldeyes 2017). Making relatedness personal adds the dimension that is needed to inspire hope and work towards restoring human dignity across our shared world. Constructed in these ways, human rights become a contemporary language that is versed in heartfelt sentiment as much as critical thought. It enables the full capacity of human vibrancy. We must become comfortable with human rights education being a space that allows people to feel what it is like to come closely into contact with their own privilege, their own bias and hatred. Approaches to human rights that convey this depth and fullness are desperately needed; otherwise, the focus becomes more on discussing and contemplating relatedness, rather than on the acts of relatedness themselves. It is not so much a profession but a space for healing. This distinction is significant because only through the momentum of everyday actions can large-scale change occur.

This chapter begins with a brief historical overview, tracing some of the ways in which human rights may be approached. From here, the chapter moves to personal stories that demonstrate human rights as both critical and heartfelt. This discussion demonstrates that human rights are not merely abstract concepts, but represent an approach to how we conduct and understand relatedness. Human rights were conceptualised through early religious and philosophical traditions (Donnelly 2004). In the aftermath of the twentieth century, a new wave of human rights thinking was instigated as a point of collective defiance against the violations of World War II. Human rights approaches were reimagined with the need to be responsive, flexible, creative, culturally embedded and meaningful to individuals and communities. While there is a compelling need to have a

broad political agenda and a united language to speak about human rights, this does not signify the end point of human rights (Bauer 2003).

### **3.3 Looking Back on Human Rights**

The question of what constitutes human rights has been fundamental to the scholarship in this field. In response to this question, I provide a brief snapshot of some of the thinking that informs contemporary understandings of human rights. However, to discuss human rights, human rights practices and human rights activism, there must be some critical understanding of what these entail, and this includes relevant historical contextualisation. When we hear the words ‘human rights’, we generally have a natural inclination to immediately think about international doctrines, the United Nations and the legal systems of international and domestic relevance that attempt to enshrine these rights. This is supported by the plethora of writing that establishes human rights within a legal framework (Chen, Offord & Garbutt 2012). Given the emphasis placed on the political and international legitimacy of human rights in more recent times, this assumption is understandable. However, it also poses a threat to the continuation of human rights-related thinking and progress. Humans have long grappled with questions of humanity, and these questions have been reproduced in the cultural and epistemological frameworks of societies through areas such as the arts, philosophy, psychology and literature (Chen, Offord & Garbutt 2012). This frames human rights as a landscape that is broad and found in the everyday—both the obscure and the political realm. In support of this, Ishay claimed:

Human rights are thus seen here as the result of a cumulative historical process that takes a life of its own, *sui generis*, beyond the speeches and writers of progressive thinkers, beyond the documents and main events that compose a particular epoch (2004, p. 2).

Ishay stated that, by asking the question ‘when do human rights begin?’, we enter the territory of asking when history begins (2004). Modern incantations of the theoretical underpinnings of human rights are undoubtedly a blurred mixture of knowledge production from far-reaching corners of the globe. However, stating that contemporary human rights are merely a reproduction of earlier knowledge is also unhelpful. It is more pertinent to acknowledge that there have been concerted efforts to define human rights comparatively (Lauren 2003). For example, Chinese philosopher Mo Tzu (470–

391 BC)—the founder of Mohism—rejected the ideals of hierarchical Confucianism and replaced them with teaching impartial justice, not just for the family or clan, but also for people throughout the world (Hayden 2001). Meanwhile, the Akan tribe of Ghana were taught the proverb: ‘one should not oppress with one’s size or might’ (Lauren 2003). Moreover, Plato (427–347 BC) deduced in his writing of the *Republic* that justice is a good to be chosen for its own sake, and this is both the state and the individual (Hayden 2001). Therefore, it is plausible to assert that there have been independent attempts to express initial thinking about what we now refer to as human rights approaches. Lauren (2003) cautioned against simplifying the historical matters of human rights history into grand statements that imply that contemporary human rights approaches have long been a part of human history. Instead, Lauren asserted that our understanding now has been shaped and reshaped by those before us, often at considerable sacrifice and with many obstacles. Therefore, it is surmised that contemporary human rights discourses are not necessarily directly linked with all that came before, but a series of on-going inquiries regarding what it means to be human and live in relationship with others.

Notwithstanding this cumulative yet independent effort is the effect of the period of the European Enlightenment. This time of rapid development saw the construction of new secular language, the emergence of science, and the emergence of collective action to destabilise aristocratic lineages and colonial privilege in the English, French and American revolutions (Bauer & Bell 1999; Ishay 2004). This period of human exploration provided a compelling time of radical discovery and rediscovery for humanity. Overall, for the purposes of this research, I do not suggest a particular time at which human rights began, and I acknowledge the many formative thinkers and actors who have shaped this field. This lends credibility to the depth of interpretations, conflicts and tensions that are invoked by the term ‘human rights’.

### **3.4 Human Rights in Contemporary Society**

Aside from the early historical efforts and ideas, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948) is a pivotal focus point in the development of a more united approach to global concerns regarding human rights (Hayden 2001). This saw the establishment of human rights through instruments, conventions and declarations (Teson cited in Hayden 2001). Emerging in the aftermath of World War II, the

enshrining of shared human rights doctrines demonstrated incredible perseverance by those involved. This was a significant move that involved delegates from all continents and representatives from numerous faiths and nationalities. Attaining an approximate understanding of what is considered a human right, with such a disparate grouping of languages, cultures and philosophical viewpoints, is a feat to be acknowledged (Ishay 2004). This led to the emergence of an international spotlight on humanity, and human rights have since enjoyed a central place in international politics, laws and development. Moreover, as well as becoming a common legal, international and political rhetoric, human rights have also emerged as a field of academic study.

Studying or working in human rights often comes with the assumption that this work is located in the areas of rationalist and positivist enquiry through the domain of law, politics and international development (Meckled-Garcia & Cali 2006). This is in addition to the historical development of human rights, that may have been explored through avenues such as religion or spirituality (Ghanea, Stephens & Walden 2007). In the last 70 years, there has been significant support for a universal understanding of human rights, and concerted effort to ensure that this universal approach is adopted across all countries and continents. Equally, there have been counter-claims arguing that the contemporary human rights approach is not compatible with all cultural and religious beliefs and societies (Teson cited in Hayden 2001). Rejection of the legitimacy of universal standards of human rights has been part of the significant difficulties encountered in the area of human rights. The counter-narrative of cultural relativist arguments has provided some interjection to the Western liberal approach (Bauer 2003). Dominant voices of human rights significantly represent Western liberal groups, and cultural relativists have argued that the area is marked by a lack of critique—particularly in terms of ‘normative’ underpinnings (Mutua 2001). An-Na’im (1992, p. 315) argued for a ‘re-conceptualization of human rights through a cross cultural approach to assist in the dialogue which is necessary in the development of standards and shared understandings’. Cultural relativism has been an influential argument in further exploring human rights as reinventions of colonialism and Western imperialism. The claim of universal human rights must be seen in the context of current and historical colonisation and ongoing oppression.

Mutua’s (2001) has been influential in critiques of the universal human rights regime. He purported that central to the grand narrative of the human rights movements is:



a subtext that depicts an epochal contest pitting savages, on the one hand, against victims and saviours, on the other ... thus rendering of the human rights corpus and its discourse is uni-directional and predictable, a black and white construction that pits good against evil (Mutua 2001, p. 205).

His analysis was scathing and argued that the current status quo depicts white people as the saviours of poor non-white people who were savaged by other non-white people. He questioned the very basis for the claim of a human rights project 'to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small' (Mutua 2001, p. 206). His ideas echo the sentiments of many cultural relativists in both scholarly and political agenda fields. With such tension, it is essential that cultural arguments be fully embraced. This is not to suggest that the whole human rights project is thwarted, but it does indicate the areas that require consideration and effort. To progress, I consider some of the attempts to provide a theoretical underpinning of what is meant by human rights. Critically, Sen & Nussbaum (1993) asserted that one of the flaws of the human rights project is a lack of rigorous theory to support its claims. In an attempt to provide a more solid basis, the framework called 'Elements of a Human Rights Theory' was developed ( Sen & Nussbaum, 1993 p. 134). Summarised below, is the attempt by Sen & Nussbaum to theoretically summarise human rights:

- Human rights are an ethical demand, this is not to be confused with human rights being a legal doctrine. These two areas are separate and also interrelated.
- Human rights need to be applicable.
- There are ethical requirements of human rights and this is most prominent in the notion that someone (institution) must safeguard and promote these rights.
- We must look beyond legal doctrines for the scope of human rights.
- Strengthening institutional protection for human rights is a central aim. It is also important to consider that just because there is no legal or institutional protection mechanism doesn't mean there is no ethical right to be protected. ,
- Universality should be reinterpreted an on-going international dialogue.

This framework signals another disruption to the continual emphasis on the notion of one legitimate discourse of human rights. As such, I open the door to human rights as an

ambiguity. Presenting a human rights approach that includes the practice of yoga disrupts the assumption that legalistic mechanisms are the only suitable approach to human rights. This also disrupts the idea that there is one Western liberal idea of human rights based approaches, when in fact there are many different approaches. Considering the framework just given, it becomes a clear possibility that activism subject to research in this thesis falls, quite simply into the domain of human rights. However I believe that the capabilities and wellbeing approach purported by Sen & Nussbaum (1993) adds another contemporary approach to understanding human rights. Considering wellbeing, which is not only a theme for human rights work but is also central for yoga, is a clear intersection of both of these areas (yoga and human rights). I extrapolate on the idea of yoga and wellbeing in the following chapter.

Philosophical thought has been somewhat useful in continuing to develop a workable human rights theory. Philosophical theorising is needed in the area of human rights to establish a foundation for its theoretical underpinnings (Sen & Nussbaum 1993). In addition I move now to the human capabilities approach which emphasises what people are able to *be* and *do*. An outline for the human capabilities approach is established in political liberalism, and not in any metaphysical, religious or existential approach (Sen & Nussbaum 1993, p. 5). Within this approach, it is crucial that each individual in a society have access to the same conditions that she outlines as capabilities.

The Central Human Functional Capabilities which includes the following:

1. life—being able to live to the end of our human life
2. bodily health—being able to have good health, to be adequately nourished and to have shelter
3. bodily integrity—being able to move freely from place to place, having one's body boundaries treated as sovereign, having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and having choice in matters of reproduction
4. senses, imagination and thought—being able to use the senses and to imagine, think and reason, cultivated by adequate education
5. emotions—being able to have emotional attachments to things and people outside of ourselves, and not having one's emotional development blighted by overwhelming fear, anxiety, traumatic events, abuse or neglect

6. practical reason—being able to form a conception of the good, and engage in critical reflection to plan one's life
7. affiliation—(i) being able to live with and towards others, show concern for other human beings, engage in social interaction, act compassionately and have both justice and friendship; (ii) having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation, and being treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others
8. being able to live with concerns for other species, plants and nature
9. play—being able to laugh, play and enjoy recreational activities
10. control over one's environment—(i) political: being able to participate effectively in the political choices that govern one's life, and having the right to political participation, including freedom of speech; (ii) material: being able to hold property (both land and moveable goods) and having property rights on an equal basis with others (adapted Sen & Nussbaum 1993 p.5).

The capabilities approach represents separate facets of human need, none of which can be eliminated to allow more of one and less of something else. All these areas must be considered in a whole manner to preserve human dignity (Sen & Nussbaum 1993). For example further it is not possible for an institution to endow someone with emotional wellness. Institutions or governments are responsible for ensuring that there are services available to enable people to meet these needs for themselves, thereby rendering space between these overarching functional capabilities and the way they are embedded in countries and communities (Sen & Nussbaum 1993). While this list does not provide a holistic approach to wellbeing, the moral philosophy of wellbeing is more associated with the most basic level of conditions or capabilities needed to develop wellbeing. This framework is useful when held in conjunction with the individual approaches of positive psychology, which generally do not consider the environmental context of a person who is seeking wellbeing. Further within this thesis engaged yoga becomes an integration of some of these moral elements with more practical emphasis on how this may be useful for a person, wanting to increase their emotional wellness.

Despite the tenuous links, mentioned, attempting to remedy actual human rights issues through a theoretical framework is challenging. Therefore it is essential to note that I consider both of these frameworks just given as merely signposts. There is benefit from exploring an approach that provides enough flexibility for local interpretations. To

further this argument, Ife (2012) suggested that scrutinising scholarly and academic interpretations of human rights is helpful, yet it is also helpful to consider the activists and field workers who are complicit in evolving human rights projects. Activists have been less trusted with input into human rights scholarship, yet the divide between scholarship and activism is not only unhelpful, but also borders on dangerous. Any attempt at human betterment not directly linked with the explicit work of humans is anachronistic at best.

Ife suggested that, as well as theoretical ambiguity, there is practical ambiguity for those working in the human rights area. Although he criticised the notion of the legal profession defining human rights practice, he also added that, professionally, this community has begun to create some practical knowledge of human rights (Ife 2012). This practical ambiguity will become clearer when we consider the case study participants later in Chapter 5. Ife acknowledged that there has been more emphasis on researching human rights at a theoretical level, and less at a practical level. He agreed that the distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge is a misnomer. Suggesting that theory exists without being affected by practice, and vice versa, establishes a binary relationship. As aforementioned, there have been arguments about cultural relativism and gendered voices of dissent regarding universal claims of human rights doctrines. According to Ife there are six main areas of consternation in regard to human rights, which are summarised as follows:

1. There is an inherent cultural bias in the human rights project. It is a Western normative approach that is just as oppressive and culturally dominating as it is liberating.
2. Human rights are frivolous and focus more on 'wants' than on genuine unmet needs and rights.
3. The dialogue of human rights has merely ensured that the voices of men are legitimised, while women's voices have continued to be marginalised.
4. Human rights are simply a manifestation of the colonisation processes that have been implemented around the world.
5. The focus of human rights is missing the inclusion of class analysis.
6. Human rights are an attempt to bring order to a world that is inherently disorderly (Ife 2010).

Therefore, modern human rights approaches are marked by broad-brush approaches and conceptual arguments, from cultural relativism to feminism to postmodernist thought. While there can be some surety that discussing human rights involves discussing humanity, a purely rationalist, universal and doctrine-led approach is insufficient to explore the parameters of our humanness. As Chen, Offord & Garbutt conclude, ‘the presence or absence of human rights is experienced in the everyday, not in the abstract (2012, p. 12). Therefore, leaving behind the abstracted idea of human rights through theoretical knowledge, this thesis instead turns to the everyday in an effort to understand how human rights are crafted in the lives of groups of activists. This thesis moves towards the local level, favouring small lessons over universal attempts at truth in search of relatedness, community and hope.

In this research, universalism is a general introduction to a dialogue of human rights, and not an assertion of authority or an absolute. As suggested by de Sousa Santos rejecting the claim of universalism enables a dialogue regarding the dissensions, complexities and flaws in the idea of a universal understanding of human rights (2007). He also suggested that ‘insurgent cosmopolitanism has succeeded in credibly demonstrating that there is an alternative to hegemonic, top down globalization and that there is counter hegemonic, solidarity, bottom up globalization’ (de Sousa Santos 2007, p. 11). Instead of focusing on globalised consensus, one can consider localised meaning making. I do not advocate disregarding any ideas of universalism; however, I acknowledge that viewing this as a binary situation is too simplistic. In support of avoiding oversimplifying, Ife distinguished between discursive and reflexive understandings of human rights. He argued that discursive definitions of rights occur when the notion of human rights is presented as factual, inflexible and taken-for-granted definitions, documented in charters or bills of rights (Ife 2010). Conversely, the reflexive definition of human rights occurs when people make sense of the terms themselves, and, rather than accept the definitions thrust upon them, examine and uncover the meanings for themselves. From this perspective, I foresee yoga as a reflexive approach to human rights. Ife did not state what these approaches should be—he simply suggested that they exist. I very much observe some reckoning with the meaning and acceptance of human rights in the yoga area. There appears to be a very real need to make sense of human interactions and inter-being, using practices and a language of one’s choosing. Ife’s arguments of human rights as reflexive and able to be

shaped and constructed through everyday action provide the point of critical consideration for this research. Bringing a reflexive lens to human rights research is pertinent because it does not provide a rigid structure to defend or attack, but offers open acknowledgement of the potential for learning and collaboration, with points of both convergence and tension. This returns to what the forthright Eleanor Roosevelt meant when she spoke these now iconic words:

Where, after all, do human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person: the neighbourhood [s]he lives in; the school or college [s]he attends; the factory, farm or office where [s]he works. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity, without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world. Thus we believe that the destiny of human rights is in the hands of all our citizens in all our communities (1948, p 60).

In this call to action, Roosevelt (1958) emphasised that the meaning of human rights may be found in our everyday lives. Offord supported this by extending the reflexive, localised understanding of rights to a way of action: ‘The value of human rights, therefore, lies in their activation. Only through our ability to translate the human condition in a contextual and responsible manner will it be possible to transform the self and the world’ (2006, p. 23). This is a much more difficult approach than merely ‘understanding’ the ideals of human rights. This approach urges us to enter a deeper relationship with others and ourselves. This is intimate and difficult work, and the terrain is not linear. We must be prepared to face the unknown and the places that scare us most. The usefulness of the human rights field lies in its action. In relation to this thesis, I see attempts to grapple with the self and the other through the language and practices of yoga. Of course, this focus is not a new idea for yoga; however, what is new is the use of contemporary human rights approaches, such as wellbeing; activism; and human rights issue-based discussions, including sexuality, the effect of colonisation and gender. Boutros-Ghali (1994) stated that the value of human rights lies in the exchange between *self* and *other*. This space between self and other becomes the ground of human rights—it is ripe with possibility and is the space in which activism lies.

Therefore, the focus now shifts to the realm of activism or the process of making change (Schaffer & Smith 2004). Like all arts, activism is something to be cultivated, learnt, refined and honed. It is not easy and should not be dismissed as a less important aspect of human rights. It requires skill and knowledge, and, when building these abilities, we must be able to identify them in others, as in any other field, and learn from them.

### **3.4.1 Storytelling as Activism**

Sharing stories is synonymous with activism (Schaffer & Smith 2004). This has continually been observed among those who lead compelling rebellions, who often do so by engaging critical human rights consciousness through intellectual rigour and sharing parts of themselves with others. The shared stories encompass the experiences of their suffering, their violations and the injustice they have faced or seen faced by others. These curators of intimate spaces are responsible for shining a light on human experiences that are challenging and disturbing to witness. However, being able to acknowledge and share the intimacy of losing one's human dignity and the subsequent inevitable suffering can invoke empathy and compassion, which can spark the needed change. Storytelling provides the teller with voice—a critical aspect of agency—while simultaneously enabling the audience to experience empathy, which engenders relatedness (Lampert 2005). This resonance is deeply personal and builds intimacy through which deeper human encounter emerges. Again, this approach positions human rights as lived and as an experience grounded in the everyday reality of life.

Rosie Batty's activism I believe is a clear example of this concept. Batty received the Order of Australia in 2015 and has become well known as an advocate and change agent (Thomson 2014). Her work focuses on the area of domestic violence program development, prevention and education, and has dramatically changed the landscape of women's rights in contemporary Australia. Her advocacy has seen unprecedented recognition of domestic violence as a national issue for Australians (Thomson 2014). Some of her successful projects include campaigning for a Royal Commission into the occurrence of family violence in the state of Victoria, securing extensive funding to ensure that outcomes from the commission can be followed through public resourcing, and developing a series of high-profile prevention and education programs. She did not achieve these landmark changes in domestic violence prevention and education

resources by asking the Australian public to think differently about relating to domestic and family violence (Thomson 2014). She did so by drawing people into her life story following the circumstances that led to the death of her son, Luke. She invited Australians to feel differently about domestic violence.

Batty's son was killed in horrific circumstances—he was murdered by his father while at a cricket ground, in full view of others. Her son's tragic death and Batty's subsequent pain provided the relatable story that catapulted domestic violence—one of the most prolific human rights abuses globally—into the Australian consciousness (Lee 2016). By telling and re-telling her experience as the impetus to her activism, Batty was able to provide a context for others to understand this specific human rights abuse. Luke's murder sparked outrage that parents could be so cruel and unable to cope with their circumstances after separation. Her activism was spurred by the desperate need to ensure that other children are not placed in the same circumstances as her son (Lee 2016 & Thomson 2014). Her story resulted in public and government agreement regarding the need for cohesive services, and called into doubt the current services and their ability to meet the needs of vulnerable women and children who live with domestic violence. Perhaps what made Batty so relatable was that this could possibly happen to anyone, however her choice was extraordinary. In the face of what must have been, the agony of losing her son, she campaigned and succeeded in changing public perceptions of family violence (Thomson 2014). She provided the story of pain and grief that made it possible for others to understand the dynamics and dangers of domestic violence in a relatable manner. Over the years since her son's death, Batty has demonstrated the activation of human rights mentioned in the section previously. Chen, Offord & Garbutt (2012) referred to human rights as being 'activated' when one gives voice to suffering. Demonstrating, articulating and reflecting human suffering has been essential to introduce to the public conversation human rights issues that were often not give the vital attention that has been needed. Batty's example illustrates the way she made the children and women's rights agenda a relevant and compelling issue within Australia.

Of course, not all of us have experiences such as Batty, and most of us will not be such central actors in large-scale change. It is easy to view people who have burning passion and momentum for change, and be unable to identify how to garner that momentum, as it is not necessarily something one can 'copy'. Instead of merely recreating what someone else is doing, we are required to ask questions of ourselves and follow our own



journey into agency and empowerment. It is too easy to believe that one must be important, visible or accomplished to be an activist. Thus, the use of storytelling is not to replicate others' examples—it is to light the fire of agency in others and re-ignite it in ourselves over and over again. In this research, I have used case studies of both well-known activists and people who are quietly working in their own communities, there is no hierarchy of importance.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

Understanding human rights beyond the remit of the legal and abstract is crucial to the momentum of this field. By drawing on deeper layers of human inter-being, the possibilities are ripe. Continuing the unnecessary containment of the topic mutes the perspectives of many people, and engenders power to a select few. Relatedness provides language and breadth to which all can contribute. Through this, the future of human rights can be revived. As well as relatedness, human wellbeing is established as a helpful concept. Using the capabilities approach and establishing the minimal conditions for wellbeing to flourish is a valuable approach for political and international human rights. This perspective remains firmly rooted in the human condition and provides greater scope so that communities can build more of what they need.

This chapter has problematised the notion of human rights as a legal mechanism and international political endeavour with universal applicability. I have argued that the reliance of human rights as an institutional is actually divisive to the work of human rights activism. Instead, human rights are constructed as relatedness that occurs in the everyday and common experience. The reliance on governance structures or head-of-state agreements cannot provide the necessary intimacy of relatedness that is found in our hearts, homes and communities. Moving from abstracted notions towards tangible space for personal encounters is the context laid to create a meaningful human rights encounter. Relatedness is enhanced through the theoretical approach of capabilities that support the determinations of wellbeing. Wellbeing is not only the domain of positive psychology—it is also an influential concept with roots in moral and political philosophy. As the most basic requirement for the conditions of human flourishing, wellbeing provides fruitful guidance for a contemporary focus on human rights. Therefore, the concepts of relatedness and wellbeing provide an opening within which the idea of yoga can neatly fit into the aims of the thesis.

In the final section, I discussed the value of storytelling in activism as a powerful medium for relatedness and enabling human dignity. This positions this thesis in the area of human rights in the lives of everyday people. I continued the argument that this is where change is possible—this is the fertile ground that must be kept in focus to enable the overall betterment of the human condition. This suggestion is encouraged by Rorty who removed human rights from the remit of religion, moral truths and arguments based on the innate human nature. He purposefully sidestepped universal truths, opting for what he called ‘sentimental education’ (Rorty cited in Hayden 2001). This sentimental education is a project in re-storying and he concluded that this is not a project in convincing others, that there is morality to be found in the belief of a human rights. Instead, he argues that human rights is a project that seeks to alleviate the suffering of others, and this can be achieved by exposing people to the in-depth stories of suffering as they exist in the world. As stated by Rorty:

Human solidarity should be seen not as a fact to be recognised by clearing away ‘prejudice’ or burrowing down to previously hidden depths but rather as a goal to be achieved. It is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of pain and humiliation of other unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalise people different from ourselves by thinking ‘They do not feel it as we could’, or ‘There must always be suffering, so why not let them suffer?’ (1989, p. 242).

However much Rorty’s words resonate with me, it must be taken further than this. There is still much missing in the creation of meaningful and ground-up human rights culture. This layer comprises the stories of the way in which those who are activists in the human rights project. Therefore, building on Rorty’s thinking, I present the area of human rights as having the potential to be deeply personal and found in everyday interactions in communities. When we ask questions about human rights, we do not abstract ourselves from the questions. While I agree with Rorty’s sentiments, I believe that there must be more done than an evaluation of others. I am not swayed by human rights scholarship that fails to discuss their own way of interacting with ‘other’. It feels cool, detached and so unlike the messy world that I know human rights activism to be. If people in positions of leadership in the area of human rights are to lead a generation

of human rights activism, surely we must set the tone by beginning with ourselves. How can we teach others to look inside to see where they are cruel, biased and hateful if we have not done this ourselves? We do not sanitise our experience from the issue—we consider the way we interact with those around us, and we question our assumptions. I am concerned when human rights scholarship discusses human relationships between the self and other, yet authors, teachers, activists and researches do not view their own lives as work that must be undertaken. We must know our biases. We must see where we are harsh and hurt others. This must be the work of human rights scholarship. This is where we can truly come to see our potential to be of service.

At times, our circle of influence might appear underwhelming, considering the vast suffering of the world. However, we cannot be deterred by the meagre offerings that one life can contribute. Too much emphasis on legalistic, institutional or government approaches to human rights has the potential to create a false sense of security—and that often looks and feels like ‘this mess that we are in is someone else’s business and they need to sort it out’. I consider this type of thinking to be dangerous and even deluded. I fully recognise that there is a role for government and institutions however this is not the where relationships will be formed and maintained. The project of human rights is everyone’s business, and I believe this message is most needed now. This is where I believe that the growing awareness in the yoga community can be of value to the human rights project. Yoga is well embedded in many corners of the world. Its popularity is unprecedented and provides an unusual opportunity for growth of human rights consciousness, understood through the practices and philosophies of yoga. As I have inferred, I believe that, if there is to be any significant change in human rights and wellbeing, this will be most likely achieved through individuals understanding their own agency to make change. My observations are that human rights have been dominated by ‘top-down’ approaches and this thinking caused a problematic lack of empowerment. If the essence of human rights is located in the interaction of human relatedness and inter-being, then it is here that the work of human rights can be completed. To revive a contemporary discussion of human rights, it is necessary to re-centre human rights as an approach that is bound to activism and activation.

The approach taken in this thesis represents a growing interest in and reconceptualisation of human rights as an everyday human encounter. The goal of increasing human rights consciousness is not merely to know more about human rights.

One must go well beyond knowing into the field of *doing* and *being*—this is where our ability to influence and create change can be exercised, and where the project of human rights can become potent. Returning to the specifics of this thesis, I noticed that the case study participants used a variety of approaches for this action. Some of these actions were informed by or used the practices of yoga. Therefore, the focus of this thesis now moves towards yoga. Yoga has a long associated history of intimacy with the human and a rich approach to understanding the human condition. The following chapter, Chapter 4 begins to merge contemporary human rights with the concepts of yoga, as the central focus of this research. I follow the thread of yoga from some of its historical forms into a modern day proliferation of engaged yoga.

## **Chapter 4: The Making of Engaged Yoga**

### **4.1 Chapter Overview**

As aforementioned, there is little research specifically examining yoga connected to human rights. Therefore, to reach what I observed to be engaged yoga, I examined a relatively broad area to inform this piece of research. In this chapter, I emphasise the emergence of engaged yoga as a new form of yoga that is affected by its context. To achieve this, I address the way yoga has been contextualised over different terrain. I assert that yoga is not an uninterrupted, linear set of practices or beliefs. Instead, I argue that the common factor that unites yoga is a quest for authenticity and that this by nature is diverse. The way one demonstrates authenticity is subject to change, as new knowledge is garnered and emphasis shifts. This chapter captures the changing emphasis of yoga practices and beliefs, which highlight the attempts for authentic being. Finally, the chapter concludes by examining engaged yoga as an avenue for exploring concepts of human rights.

I acknowledge that yoga is a daunting task for research because it can simultaneously conjure images ranging from cave-dwelling men with long beards to a Lycra-worthy physique stretched into spectacular positions. It is pertinent to acknowledge that both of these images are valid. However, given the extremes in these descriptions, it is clear that yoga covers considerable ground and ranges from a spiritual practice of the Indian subcontinent to a health and wellbeing phenomena spread around the world. These interpretations of yoga are affected by the era, geographic location, context and practices (Singleton & Byrne 2008; Strauss 2005). These contexts range from the early Indus Valley civilisations to the street corners of major cities today. Therefore, general definitions can be limiting. Nevertheless, as a starting point, I offer Strauss's (2005) general statement that yoga can be described as an attitude, philosophy, set of practices and way of being in the world.

Perhaps because of the broad way we can conceptualise yoga, we see that it is indeed 'unobtrusively but visibly expanding' (De Michelis 2008, p. 17). When we use the term 'yoga', there can be a simultaneous invocation of any mix of religious, philosophical, metaphysical, esoteric, secular, therapeutic, health, mental health, physiological practice

and groups of practices and theories (Graham 2012). I assert that drawing on the concept of one idea of yoga is convenient, yet misleading. Thus, rather than presenting an understanding of yoga as certain, I offer the eclecticism that is part of yoga itself. This may disrupt the unequivocal understanding of yoga that some people hold; however, I argue that yoga is complex and diverse. As a result, I do not provide an exhaustive explanation of the history of yoga.

This chapter disrupts the idea of one definitive definition of yoga. Yoga is instead premised as a polysemic term and a concept that is fraught with tension and even the absurd. As aforementioned, this chapter does not cover an exhaustive exploration of yoga. It is limited to some aspects of the historical roots of yoga knowledge, some current complexities, and, briefly, the connection between yoga and Buddhism—particularly as it relates to social action. It is surmised that the observed phenomena of yoga and human rights is a collaboration that will herein be referred to as ‘engaged yoga’. Engaged yoga is the term I have allocated to the concept of yoga as an approach to activate human rights. This is a new area of scholarship and is a significant turning point because it represents a new direction for yoga. I argue that engaged yoga is not ‘ancient wisdom’ brought to life, but is a juncture for the intermingling of contemporary human rights approaches with contemporary proliferations of yoga. This chapter sets the scene for the multiple incarnations of yoga, and aims to recognise yoga’s diversity and complexity.

## **4.2 Origins of Yoga**

Out of the Indus Valley and Indian subcontinent, four of the world’s great religions were born: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. While these religions are generally referred to as uniquely separate, this separation may represent a false compartmentalisation (Feuerstein 2001; Stone 2010). As Byrne stated:

“Engagement with the spiritual traditions of India that fall under the umbrella term Hinduism, reflect the very nature of Hinduism. Hinduism is decentralised, diverse, inclusive and accepting, reflecting the different characters and aptitudes of individuals and historical developments within India” (2008, p. 153).

Thus, not only are the major religions interrelated, but the internal structure of these traditions are also interwoven. Later in this chapter, I discuss Buddhism and the

associated practices of mindfulness to further demonstrate the somewhat eclectic relationship alluded to here. Immediately below is a timeline that includes some of the central teachers of yoga and Buddhism, and demonstrates the interwoven teachings.

**Table 4.1: Timeline of Significant Yoga Texts and Teachers**

2000 CE	1888–1989	Tirumalai Krishnamacharya
	1863–1902	Swami Vivekananda
	17th–18th c.	Siva Samhita
	17 c.	<i>Gheranda Samhita</i>
	15th–16th c.	Yogi Svatmarama
1500 CE	15th c.	<i>Hatha Yoga Pradipika</i>
	1200–1253	Dōgen Zenji
	1100–1200	Yoga Vasistha
1000 CE	1000	Goraksha—Hatha yoga
	788–820	Shankaracharya
	8th c.	Kashmir Shaivism
	8th c.	Padmasambhava
	600	<i>Heart Sutra</i>
	6th–7th c.	Vajrayana
500 CE	5th c.	Bodhidharma
	150	Patanjali
	150–250	Nagarjuna
	2nd c.	<i>Samkhya Karika of Isvara Krsna</i>
500 BCE	563–483	Gautama Buddha
	600	<i>Bhagavad Gita</i> and <i>Mahabharata</i>
	800–100	<i>Upanishads</i>
1000 BCE		
1500 BCE	1700–1100	<i>Rigveda</i>

Source: Adapted from Gopalkrishnan (2012), Kiseong (2012) and Stone (2010).

To briefly demonstrate the way yoga has developed over context and time, I now turn the focus to some of the major historical developments of yoga. This is a significant period, yet here it must be covered within a few paragraphs; thus, I only attempt a historical recounting in a general manner. To provide a framework for yoga as continually changing, I divide the stages into the Vedic, Pre-Classical, Classical and Modern yoga eras to provide a brief context to the development of yoga.

It is accepted that yoga has its origins in the Indus Valley, with earliest possible dates ranging from 1000 to 1500 BCE (Stone 2010). At this time, the Indus Valley incorporated areas from modern Afghanistan, Pakistan and North-Western India. The word ‘yoga’ originated from the text of the *Rigveda*—one of the seminal texts from the Vedic period. More broadly, Indian spiritual traditions date back to at least 4000 BCE; however, there is no compelling evidence that yoga—particularly yoga postures—date back this far (Stone 2010). During the Vedic period, as understood through the compilations of the written teachings accessible from this time, yoga generally emphasised the teachings of mind expansion. At this time, the followers of yoga exemplified their connection to the divine by simple living, which was often close to nature and in solitude (Feuerstein 2001). An emphasis on rituals, praising deities and contemplating the nature of god pervaded the teachings (Kiseong 2012). From the Vedic era, yoga then moved through the inevitable changes of time into the Pre-Classical era.

The Pre-Classical era of yoga is demarcated by compilations of writings, including the *Upanishads*, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* (Stephens 2010). Beginning with the *Upanishads*, the understanding of authenticity in yoga expands the emphasis on the *Sanskrit* term ‘*Yuj*’, meaning ‘to yoke’, ‘to join’ or to ‘join together’ (Iyengar 2001). According to the *Upanishads*, yoking refers to joining the individual consciousness and universal consciousness. Also central to the teachings of the *Upanishads* is the emphasis that one must look within to understand that we are part of something larger than ourselves (Cook-Cottone 2015; Stephens 2010). Other significant yogic texts of this time include the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. In the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavad Gita* is located (Penman, Cohen et al. 2008). The *Bhagavad Gita* is referred to as one of the foundational texts in modern yoga, and I consider this especially relevant to this discussion of engaged yoga because its teachings begin to emphasise devotion and service to others. The *Bhagavad Gita* is focused on the nature of *Atman* (the self), and yogic knowledge is considered through the forms of *Jnana* yoga (yoga of knowledge and intellect), *Bhakti* yoga (yoga of devotion) and *Karma* yoga (yoga of selfless service). The teachings of *Brahman* (the ultimate truth) and *Atman* are not only part of the yoga tradition, but are also foundational to Hinduism, thereby demonstrating the connection between these areas (Sheikh 2015). In the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna (the teacher) explains to Arjuna (the student) that the true self is eternal and



unchanging, while the bodily self is able to decay. For example, Krishna says to Arjuna, ‘Even as the embodied self attains in this body childhood, youth and old age, so does it attain another body; the wise man does not get deluded at this’ (*Bhagavad Gita*: 2.13). This emphasis on the eternal and the earthly is considered central to the focus of yoga teaching during this time. From the Pre-Classical era, yoga was again reformulated through the changes of the next centuries towards the Classical era.

The term Classical yoga generally refers to the *Yoga Sutras*, which are credited to Patanjali (Feuerstein 2001; Simpkins & Simpkins 2011). The *Yoga Sutras* are widely proliferated as one of the most well-known texts of yoga, and include the teachings that are referred to as the ‘eight limbs’ of practice. These eight limbs represent a general direction to be followed by the seeker to overcome the difficulties that they have on their spiritual path, and to reach the state referred to as *Samadhi* (joining of individual and universal) (Feuerstein 2001). It is because of the eight limbs of this practice that this path is also referred to as *Ashta* (meaning eight) and as *Raja Yoga* (meaning royal) (Feuerstein 2001). The eight limbs are a balance of integrated spiritual practices and states of awareness (Iyengar 2001; Stone 2010). The pathways to the authentic expressions of yoga emphasised in these teachings include:

1. *Yama*: there are five *yamas* and they are considered universal moral guidelines in nature: *ahimsa* or non-violence, *satya* or truthfulness, *asteya* or non-stealing, *brahmacharya* or chastity and *aparigraha* or non-coveting. The *yamas* describe how a yoga practitioner relates to the world.
2. *Niyama*: these relate to the individual, and are *saucha* or practices of purity and cleanliness, particularly of the body: *santosa* or contentment, *tapas* or an intense and concentrated effort, *svadhyaya* or self-study or education, and *isvara pranidhana* or dedication of one’s actions to a higher consciousness or power.
3. *Asana*: these postures or positions serve to strengthen and invigorate the body, thereby helping all physical systems work harmoniously. They include the skeletal and muscular structures, as well as the circulation, respiratory, glandular and nervous systems. The *asanas* are performed with awareness, with a focus on the breath and the internal experience.
4. *Pranayama*: practices of breath regulation and control. Through the breath, the body is relaxed and energised. There are many different techniques of pranayama.

5. *Pratyahara*: this action occurs through the practices outlined above, and involves practitioners turning their focus within, so they are less affected by their senses. This is the first step towards meditation.
6. *Dharana*: this is the practice of focused concentration. It may occur through focusing on one thing, such as one of the senses. This is a preparatory stage for meditation.
7. *Dhyana*: this refers to meditation, mindfulness and stilling the mind.
8. *Samadhi*: this refers to joining or yoking the individual and universal.

The meaning of yoga traditionally taught in *Yoga Sutra* 1.2 describes yoga as ‘*yoga chitta vritti nirodha*’. This is literally translated as cessation of the fluctuations of the mind (Chapple 2008; Iyengar 2001). It is noteworthy that, in the seminal text of *Yoga Sutras*—often referred to as the basis of modern yoga—there is scant emphasis on postures of yoga (Cook-Cottone 2015), even though the eight limbs emphasise multiple other features that are considered seminal to yoga. Therefore, this indicates that the physical culture that is now so closely associated with yoga was not considered central to the tradition in the Classical period. Also within the Classical era of yoga, texts such as the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* and *Yoga Vasistha* were written (Cook-Cottone 2015). The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* is thought to be written by Swami Svātmanāma, and is often considered the source of what is understood as modern *Hatha* yoga. While the physical aspects of yoga are not central, the changes to yoga that occurred during the Classical era began to see the focus of yoga become more entwined with the physical body. The practices were more interested in what is referred to as *Tantric* yoga, with a focus on cleansing the body of impurities. This change gradually began to shift the emphasis to the physical experiences of the embodied self. From this juncture, yoga departed to what is referred to as ‘modern yoga’.

A significant part of the modernisation of yoga is often attributed to include the teacher Vivekananda. Through his work, he was influential in developing what was considered a practical yoga system for interested Western students (Singleton 2010). Vivekananda did not initially teach *asana* (yoga poses) to his American students; instead, he emphasised meditation practices and approaches that supported positive thinking (Singleton 2010). It was not until the mid-1900s that *asana* began to become more central to yoga. This rise in *asana* can be linked to gymnastics, which was also gaining popularity at the time. The poses derived from movements that were also blossoming

across Europe (Singleton 2010). Vivekananda is known as one of the most influential Indian teachers who took yoga to Western students for the first time, and he was influenced by the growing physical culture found in India at the time (Singleton 2010). Upon reaching Western culture, more adaptations and innovations were created; however, it is important to remember that Western cultures were not receiving a 'pure' yoga that was devoid of any modern characteristics (Singleton 2010). Yoga had already been affected by the presence of Western ideals. Singleton (2010) argued that, during the mid-century, the *Yoga Sutras* were elevated to a new status in Indian intellectual life. To elaborate, while there may be disagreement regarding what is considered 'true' yoga, it is clear that the words of Patanjali have been reinterpreted to fit the times and needs of practitioners. As stated by Singleton:

Whether we regard yoga as a disjunction from an authentic, extant, living tradition at the heart of a Hinduism (the position of some Western practitioners and modern Hindus), a revival of a subsequently defunct one, or an invention of a new one, this remains secondary to the fact that in the modern period we are dealing with an altered Patanjali, reinterpreted to the aspiration and constraints of the age (2010, p. 80):

Essentially, many people have reimagined yoga. Engaged yoga, which I discuss later, is another example of how yoga has been reimagined.

After yoga connected with Western cultures, new developments proliferated, and this continues to be seen today. One of the most obvious changes is the dominance or centrality of the asana aspects of yoga practice. Modern yoga is arguably dominated by the physical practice of postures or asana (Horton 2012 & 2015). Techniques of the body have become predominantly linked to the term yoga. While 'ancient knowledge' is regularly called on to contextualise the teachings, there is a less explicit focus on sources that pre-date this modern incantation of yoga. For example, while the *Yoga Sutras* and the wisdom of Patanjali are often referenced, there is scant understanding of Patanjali's teaching. While teachers will assure students that they are practising wisdom, it is likely they are referring to the 'seats' that were briefly mentioned in the *Upanishads* and the *Yoga Sutras* at a later time. However, as I move to discuss the yoga that is now practised around the world, it is important to consider the threads that connect this modern yoga to the previous explorations of yoga. Moreover, it is worth considering whether all modern yoga practices are connected with the notions outlined

in the *Upanishads*. Questions such as these highlight the remaining uncertainty. What emanates from this discussion is less certainty, yet a crucial need for critical discussion about what the term yoga encompasses, how it is invoked and the pressure to which it has been subject. I have noticed some lack of willingness to embrace this type of discussion in the yoga community. It fits a certain story of yoga that is sympathetic to the needs of New Age seekers who crave to construct their practices as authentic, and therefore construct themselves as authentic as well. The story that fulfils many seekers' needs relates to yoga being both ancient and perennial philosophy. The wisdom of yoga texts is interpreted as being authoritative, authentic and unchanged. However, Singleton (2010) challenged this thinking regarding modern yoga. He found that yoga is not a single and linear practice that is unblemished and passed from generation to generation. Rather, modern yoga is as likely to be found at a gym, mimicking the workouts and body-based fitness rituals of the urban elite, as it is to be interpreted as a practice of Samadhi.

Understandings such as Singleton's (2010) may have come as a shock to some, yet it is not a unique perspective, with other writers echoing Singleton's findings. For example, Stone (2009, p. 3) stated that 'there is no compelling evidence that an inward-focussed as opposed to god-centred spiritual tradition existed among either indigenous or migrant peoples of the Indian subcontinent before the first millennium BCE'. These perspectives certainly disrupt the normative understandings of yoga as ancient and based upon this ancient wisdom yoga brings a currency that is valuable. This disruption is often not well received, as many are invested in another interpretation of modern yoga. While I am unsure why this is, it is easy to speculate that business, brands and entire empires have been built on this particular story of yoga. Wisdom has been staked as a claim and lines have been drawn in the sand. The yoga blogosphere is full of articles and commentary regarding the authenticity of yoga. It is clear that there are some interpretations of yoga from which many people in the yoga field wish to be distanced. From my observations, the conversation appears to be littered with arguments about the acceptability of new practices of yoga. Arguments are weighed against the idea of the unblemished and authentic, and discarded if they do not meet this standard. If they seem too Western, they are at risk of being rejected. With many teachers and students buying into the claims of unblemished yoga, Eastern spiritual superiority based on Orientalism and the

possibility of an authentic awakening, my assumption is that it will take serious challenging to change this interpretation of both history and fact.

This disruption to the preferred narrative recreated by yoga seekers—that modern postural yoga is a direct descendant of an ancient wisdom—has caused difficulty for yoga practitioners who use the gaze of Orientalism to build claims of authenticity. The practices and study of yoga, like much Eastern philosophy, has been affected by Orientalism.

This timely uncovering suggests that modern postural yoga was also affected by physical practices, such as gymnastics and bodybuilding, thereby completely undoing the work of the exotic and spiritual claims distributed by postural yoga to assert dominance in a marketplace that was seeking the ancient, authentic, exotic, mystical and other. These claims were used to bolster the ideas separating yoga from Western culture. However, Singleton (2010) warned against referring to modern postural yoga as ‘less real’ or ‘spiritual’ than other form of yoga. He concluded:

the history of early modern physical culture overlaps with and intersects with the histories of para-religious, unchurched spirituality, Western esotericism, medicine, health and hygiene; chiropractic, osteopathy, and bodywork; body-centred psychotherapy; the modern revival of Hinduism; and the socio-political demands of the emergent modern Indian nation (to name a few) (Singleton 2010, p. 208).

As Singleton (2010) found, yoga underwent change in South Asia; however, this change was perhaps accelerated and furthered upon yoga’s introduction to the West. From the late eighteenth century, yoga made its way into Western settings through teachers such as Swami Vivekananda, Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, BKS Iyengar, Swami Yogananda and Sri K Pattabhi Jois (Desikachar 2005; Feuerstein 2001; Singleton 2011). This led to a surge of interest in ‘transnational anglophone yoga’ within the larger surge of interest in physical culture (Singleton 2010). While Feuerstein (2001) articulated that interest of Westerners in yoga asana and related practices is a perversion of the yoga tradition by Western culture, Singleton (2010) noted that this is a problematic oversimplification. Here, I agree with Singleton because, as explained earlier, there is no ‘one’ unchanging idea of yoga. Instead, I support the idea that yoga has always evolved to meet the needs of its practitioners. Yoga is and has always been a process of metamorphosis. Therefore, this continues to build the picture that yoga has been under a continual process of

authentication. In a very unique manner, yoga is in a constant state of change because it is affected by social and cultural norms (Strauss 2005). I position engaged yoga as one of these dynamic encounters, and the growth of this field is only beginning. This is particularly important as this discussion moves towards using the extensive remit of yoga as a pathway to social justice through the language of human rights. Yoga is a proliferation of practices that cross and incorporate both Eastern and Western knowledge. The current proliferations of yoga are growing rapidly and it remains difficult to stay abreast; however, to situate engaged yoga, I endeavour to describe some of the current manifestations of yoga.

### **4.3 The Current Yogascape**

Based on a 2012 survey about sport and recreation in Australia, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) found yoga was one of the top 10 physical activities undertaken by women, with 3.3% of Australian women (298,900 women) indicating that they participated in yoga. A further survey conducted by Penman et al regarding the participation rates of yoga across Australia (2012) concluded that in Australia adults tend to self prescribe yoga for their health needs. The participant rate is estimated to be between 3% of the population (for physical health) and 12% of the population (for therapeutic applications). In Australia and other Western countries, yoga is visibly expanding in popularity, often as a fitness and wellness activity. In terms of yoga research, there has been a focus on clinical applications (Park, Braun & Siegel 2015). However, a recent US study compiled a total of 55 studies about general participation in yoga. In these studies, the typical yoga practitioner is ‘female, upper socio-economic status, educated, middle aged and white’ (Berila et al 2016). However given the small uptake numbers in the Australian study above, this indicates that there is room for the yoga industry to continue to expand into and beyond its current market. Thus, given its popularity and potential, what is yoga in the contemporary world?

De Michelis provided a broad definition of modern yoga as:

those disciplines that are, to a greater or lesser extent, rooted in South Asian contexts and more specifically draw inspiration from certain philosophies, teachings, and practices of Hinduism. These teachings and practices, by way of export, syncretic assimilation, and subsequent acculturation processes have by now become an integral part of (primarily) urban cultures worldwide and are usually represented,

disseminated and discussed primarily (though not exclusively) by way of the English language (2008, p. 19).

This definition broadly covers the various forms that represent the conglomeration of modern yoga. However, what is more likely to constitute yoga in today's Western world is the following definition: 'yoga is complex, comprising many different elements, including physical poses, breath work, concentration, and meditation, ethical teachings, spirituality, inward attention, and self knowledge' (Park, Braun & Siegel 2015, p. 472). Simply and pragmatically stated, yoga refers to practices that develop connection of the body, mind and spirit (Taylor 2004). As such, modern yoga is more likely to be used as a practice for human flourishing than an esoteric exploration of self in the cosmos. Further, De Michelis (2008) proposed five different types of modern yoga: psychosomatic, neo-Hindu, postural, meditational and denominational. In a general sense, yoga in contemporary Western culture refers to postural yoga. Postural yoga is the leading transnational form that focuses on asana (postures) and pranayama (yogic breathing) and usually occurs in a sessional or classroom environment. Modern interpretations of yoga consist of a wide range of philosophical, metaphysical, religious and theoretical articulations, yet these are all grounded in an experiential epistemology. However, postural yoga has 'contributed the most to developing and codifying relatively advanced and sophisticated canons of postural theory and practice' (De Michelis 2008, p. 22).

As a result of yoga's experiential focus, it is assumed that practitioners will grasp these theories based on their own experiences and rationalisations. In contrast, denominational forms of modern yoga focus more on practitioner loyalty than on asana (De Michelis 2008). However, what is observable in the yoga community is the continual emphasis placed on differentiating one's yoga based on the authenticity of its particular lineage or practice roots. While there is a general interest in yoga, the quest for authentic yoga has become part of the narrative of modern yoga. In addition to the quest for authentic yoga, there is an interest in yoga coupled with somewhat unusual 'extras'. The term 'yoga' can be (and has been) added to myriad activities, and there is no end to the varieties. Travelling through yoga-related social media, I have observed nude yoga, 'doga' (yoga with a dog), 'snowga' (yoga in the snow), 'yin and tonic', 'yoga and vino', laughter yoga, harmonica yoga, slack line yoga and pole yoga—among many others. From within the yoga community itself, there is a discernible emerging

critique that emphasises ‘pure’ versus ‘corrupt’ forms of yoga. As we ask ourselves what constitutes yoga, it is clear that there is an underlying subtext—and this is the belief in one central notion of yoga. However, as previously established, such debates are marred by the belief that there is a pure lineage of yoga that has remained unchanged from its inception. As well as yoga teachers and schools trying to persuade potential students of their authenticity, there is the very real difficulty of being able to adequately interpret teachings so that individuals can find them helpful in today’s world. For example, as Horton stated:

sooner or later ... you’ll encounter the *Yoga Sutra* ... now I don’t claim to be an expert but I think it’s safe to assume that the *Yoga Sutra* was not written as a feel-good text for more or less normal 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans like me (2010 p. 25).

As yoga has moved away from a focus on ancient texts to a modern practice, as well as the development of some interesting new yoga varieties, there is also an observable rise of regulatory or centralised bodies—particularly related to teaching standards. There are peak bodies for registered yoga teacher in Australia, the US and internationally. The main regulating organisation for yoga teaching in Australia is Yoga Australia. Yoga Australia describes yoga as follows:

In Yoga, the body, breath and mind are seen as a union of these multi-dimensional aspects of each and every human being. The system and various techniques of Yoga cultivate the experience of that union, leading to greater integration of being, internal peacefulness and clarity of the mind. It is a system that is designed to cultivate health and happiness and a greater sense of self-awareness and higher consciousness (Yoga Australia n.d.).

This definition indicates the contemporary interpretation of yoga and the focus on contentment and health as prominent. Observable in modern yoga are the many yoga varieties that are considered diverse, particularly as they relate to the emphasis on physical practices. Some of the most popular modern styles are outlined in the table below:



**Table 4.2: Modern Yoga Styles**

Yoga Style	Description
Anusara	Heart-based teachings, based on universal principles of learning.
Ashtanga Vinyasa	The teachings of K Pattabhi Jois, which base teachings on <i>tristana</i> or linking of posture, breath and <i>drishti</i> .
Bikram	Vigorous <i>vinyasa</i> in a heated room.
Classical	Any practice based on the philosophy and practices outlined by Patanjali's <i>Yoga Sutras</i> .
Dru	Characterised by gentle movement, directed breathing and visualisations.
Hatha	Breathing, postures and cleansing routines.
Integral	Based on integrating yoga teaching into everyday life and relationships.
Iyengar	Based on the teachings of BKS Iyengar. Central to the teaching is a precise interpretation of alignment, props to support practitioners and a therapeutic intent.
Kripalu	Gentle practices focused on asana, meditation and use of breath.
Kundalini	Practices focused on raising energy from the base of the spine through the energy centres. Often associated with Yogi Bhajan.
Satyananda	Hatha yoga with some tantra practices and an emphasis on relaxation techniques, such as Yoga Nidra.
Sivananda	Hatha yoga taught by Swami Sivananda.
Tantra	Focus on the use of sexual energy for wholeness to everyday life, as well as towards spiritual practices.
Vivekananda	Generally follows the teachings of Patanjali. (Adapted from Gopalkrishnan 2012, p. 83).

As well as yoga classes being found at every gymnasium, health retreat and wellness centre, yoga is appearing in hospital settings and universities. Some of the rapid growth in yoga has been affected by the influences of Orientalism and neoliberalism. I consider the melting pot of neoliberalism to be one of the pressures leading to the rapid rise of areas such as self-help and practices such as yoga (Bar 2012). With respect to the effect of neoliberalism, within the scope of this thesis, I offer only a cursory explanation. I recognise that more thorough critique is needed; however, this is beyond the scope of this study. Using Mudge's (2008) framework, neoliberalism is constructed through a bureaucratic focus that is concerned with market issues of deregulation, competition and a political focus, which emphasises the central political ideology to unleash market forces wherever possible. I believe that it is essential to mention neoliberalism as a potential factor in shaping modern yoga. Given the emphasis of engaged yoga on social issues, it may represent a form of yoga that is growing in reaction to the market-derived

and competitive forces that are so central to neoliberalism. To link this more concretely to modern yoga, I examine a study that focused on the effect of neoliberalism and yoga.

In a 2014 study, Markula (2014) analysed 35 years of the US *Yoga Journal* covered through a Foucauldian discourse analysis of power relations, knowledge and the self. This analysis concluded that, over the 35 years, there began to be some change to the ‘yoga self’, and this self became tightly implicated within the neoliberal enterprise (Markula 2014). Markula concluded that this reading of the:

discursive formulation of yoga, in many ways, was interlinked with power diagram of neo-liberal governmentality. At the same time, this analysis might also explain some of the current cultural neoliberal context as an option for Western individuals to adopt the form of conduct defined through building the healthful looking body and through discovering the happy, true and calm self and its connection to yoga community (2014, p. 167).

However, analyses of yoga are limited, even in academic literature. Despite the rich ground for critique of modern yoga, Love (2006, p. 80) contended that ‘yoga is the survivor of the culture wars; unbloodied, unmuddled, unbothered by the media’s slings and arrows, its leotards still as pristine as its reputations’. However there are some voices of dissent. One such group is Decolonizing Yoga—a US-based activist organisation that engages in critical, feminist conversations about topics such as feminism, cultural appropriation and body image in yoga (Decolonising Yoga n.d.). Their dialogue is critical of contemporary proliferations of yoga, including the reluctance of yoga practitioners to confront sanitised versions of yoga. This is supported by some more vocal yoga teachers, who claim there appears to be a reluctance of yoga teachers and practitioners to discuss some of the shadow aspects of the yoga community (Horton 2013). Horton (2013) is concerned that, through the commercialisation and commodification of yoga, the essence of ‘self-realisation’ will be lost. She claimed that this is replaced with mass-consumed body perfecting yoga that has become a marketing dream in recent times (Horton 2013).

It is not only yoga that is under pressure from the increasing interest in body purification. The above observations from within the yoga community are similar to the sentiments of sociological investigations regarding the pivotal and often obsessive role of the body in contemporary society. Ettore summarised this notion: ‘twenty first

century bodies are located in age, gender, race, ethnic, able bodied and class ranked position, while these bodies are shaped simultaneously as sites of health disease, leisure, technology, labour, emotions, attractiveness, consumption, style and risk' (2012, p. 1). This is seen in the yoga industry in areas such as marketing apparel and the way yoga is constructed. For example, Lululemon is one of Canada's most successful brands, and is founded on selling fashionable yoga apparel. The success of this brand is arguably based on the grassroots community program that is embedded in every store. However, as well as this strategy, the brand is based on the themes of health, happiness and living one's best possible life, with mantras such as 'friends are more important than money' and 'dance, sing, floss, travel' (Wexler 2012, p. 22). This light and feel-good brand is a seductive exemplar of individualism and neoliberalism combined with the yoga movement. This is also observed elsewhere. In February 2016, 'The Best of Yoga Series Perth' was released. This is an online overview of some yoga classes in Perth, with recommendations. In this overview, modern yoga is summarised as follows:

there's hardly anything as rewarding as a perfect yoga practice. A practice that meets you where you are, challenges you without being too demanding, and leaves you in refreshed, energised, and ready to seize life. We're all looking for the 'yoga glow' and for the classes that will make that happen (Green Goodness Co. n.d.).

This reiterates yoga as a practice of bodily restoration in a contemporary context. This point is not emphasised to create a polarity between earlier expressions of yoga and modern yoga. Indeed, the contemporary emphasis on bodily routines and rituals is in some ways compatible with classical yoga. Rather, this point emphasises that the way yoga changes does not necessarily have to be rooted in anything beyond the present space and time. Moreover, alongside some of the commercialised aspects of modern yoga are developments in research that posit aspects of yoga practices and applications as credible interventions for supporting health and wellbeing.

#### **4.4 Recent Discoveries in Biomedical Yoga**

Yoga has collided with the fitness industry, yet has also taken root in biomedical approaches to health to become a popular approach to health and wellbeing (Chan, Ho & Chow 2001). Given its origins in the spiritual, this has been a challenge to both the idea of yoga and to science. From the outset, yoga's many different forms did not lend themselves well to the typical biomedical framework. However, there continues to be

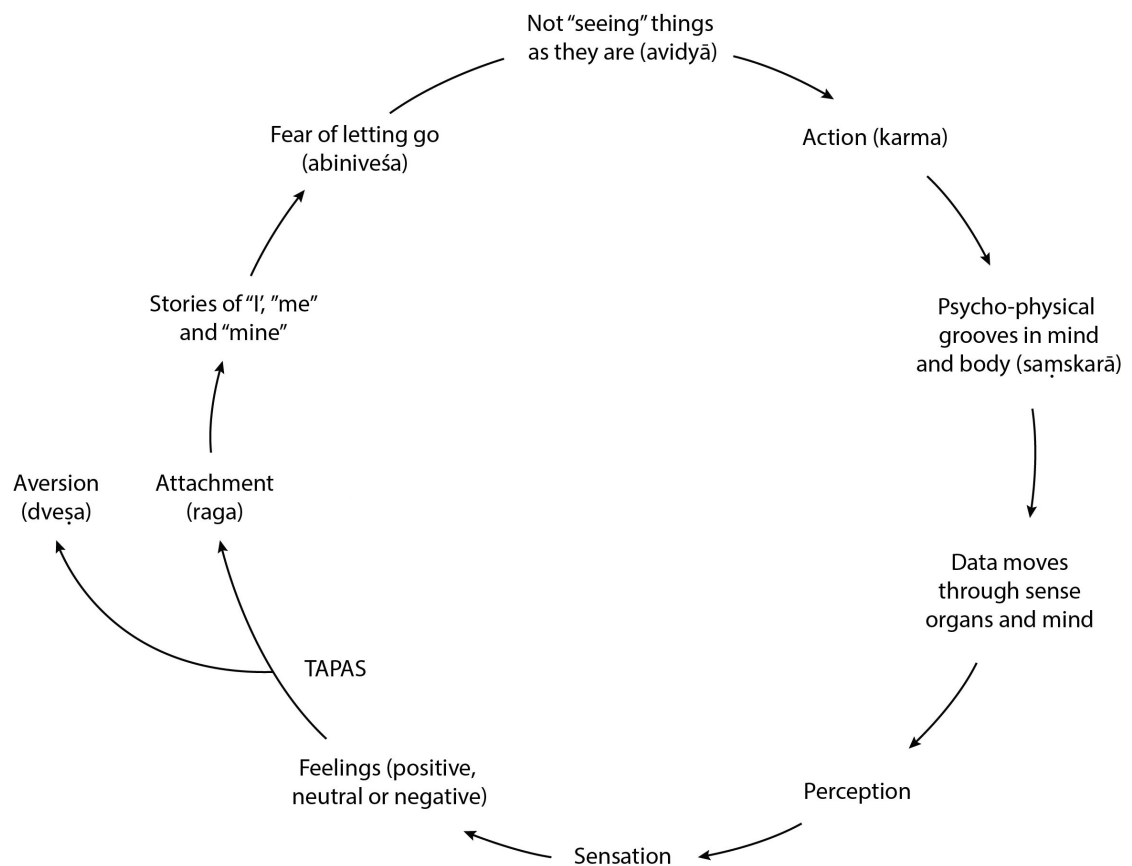
interest in building on the strengths of the biomedical system with approaches that can include biomedical, wellness and spiritual elements. This has been reasonably successful, with much research establishing interventions that include yoga as beneficial. Most of the research regarding yoga and biomedical approaches is focused on asana and pranayama interventions, similar to contemporary interests in yoga. These approaches are often described as complementary and alternative medicine (CAM).

CAM is considered the diverse set of healthcare practices that sit outside biomedical practice (Chan, Ho & Chow 2001). Yoga as a CAM is a broad definition comprising the philosophies and practices of yoga as a healing modality. As well as being positioned as a CAM, yoga has undergone a transformation. Part of this has been emerging research beginning to demonstrate the effect of yoga practices on areas of health. Some of the recent areas tested by rigorous studies in an Australian research context include yoga's effect on symptoms attributable to asthma, pain, behavioural disorders, cancer, children's yoga, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, diabetes, hypertension, immunity, mental health, post-traumatic stress disorders, restless legs and weight management (Yoga Australia n.d.). The results vary and a detailed analysis of the outcomes is not included herein. Yoga is evidently being adapted to medical settings in diverse ways, thereby adding to the way yoga is constructed. This diversification is part of the richness of contemporary applications of yoga, and needs to be acknowledged as part of the cultural exploration of yoga as a transnational and adaptable set of practices and applications. However, modern yoga is not only shaped by new developments in the biomedical, fitness and wellbeing fields—there is also growth in the areas of social activism. Already well established in the area of Buddhism is what is referred to as 'socially engaged Buddhism'. In the following section, the focus moves towards a few of the connecting points between yoga and Buddhism. The discussion then offers a brief outline of socially engaged Buddhism, and finally establishes that yet another change is occurring—and this is engaged yoga.

#### **4.5 Yoga and Liberation from Suffering**

As previously stated, the paths of yoga, Hinduism and Buddhism have been interrelated and overlapping since their early inception in the Indus Valley civilisations. Central to their interrelationship is the notion of suffering, which is an aspect central to yogic, Buddhist philosophy and practices (Brach 2013; Stone 2010). Yoga not only begins in

the present moment (*atha*), but also begins with the recognition that suffering, stress, discontent and dissatisfaction characterise much of the moment-to-moment experience (Chodron 2013; Kabat-Zinn 1990). Central to both Hinduism and Buddhism is description of the way to attain liberation from suffering (*dukkha*). Peacock (2008) cautioned that some interpretations of *dukkha* have led to the belief that Buddhist teachings are negative and even pessimistic towards life. This is partly because of the inadequate translation of the term *dukkha*, which more specifically means ‘unsatisfactoriness’ (Peacock 2008). The teachings of yoga and Buddhism state that we cannot escape *dukkha*, yet highlight the possibility of liberation from suffering. It is the fluctuations of the mind and their content that keep the wheel of *samsara* turning. The following diagram illustrates the ‘Wheel of Suffering’—the cycle in which the origins of suffering are perpetuated by not clearly seeing clearly the nature of the moment. From there, we base our actions and deepen our habituated mind patterns, which feed into stories of ego (I, me and mine), and the cycle continues. Within this wheel are factors that contribute to are not being with things as they are.



**Figure 4.1: The Wheel of Suffering**

These are (*avidya*), aversion (*dvesa*) and attachment (*raga*); stories of I, me and mine (*asmita*); and fear of letting go (*abhinivesa*). On the other side of the wheel are action (*karma*); psychophysical impressions in the mind (*samskaras*); and information moving through senses—perception, sensation and feelings (positive, negative or neutral). *Tapas* forms an integral teaching of yoga come from the *Upanishads*, and describes the practitioner or aspirant as burning with intensity to know the truth (Stone 2008). *Tapas* is created when we stay, breath by breath, with opposing forces that we describe as positive, negative or neutral. The practice of *tapas* is to remain still, regardless of what is occurring. In turn, this patience and stillness eventually strengthen the foundation on which we stand (Feuerstein 2001). In the practice of yoga, *tapas* can be experienced when we open to the present moment to become aware of the range of experiences and stay with the experience. *Tapas* can literally be described as heat.

The *klesas* are significant in yoga because they are the states that are said to cover the heart, and are the obstacles to be overcome to find liberation. The six *klesas* are *kama* (desire), *krodha* (anger), *moha* (delusion), *lobha* (greed), *matsarya* (envy) and *mada* (sloth) (Stone 2008). As the aspirant practices, these are the mind–body states that become part of the practice of yoga, and, with *tapas*, we begin to burn through these tendencies (Stone 2008, 2009 & 2011). In terms of creating space from suffering, yoga focuses on expanding and strengthening pathways in the mind–body that are less frequently used, and to whatever experiences arise moment to moment (Stone 2008 & 2009). This ultimately allows an opening to occur:

when you no longer need to create a sense of self, you are free to be yourself. In this way you can use the mind to create a more solid base from which to see and take action; however, the solid base is not ontologically substantial but rather the psychological sense of being existentially grounded in the midst of change (Stone 2008, p. 82).

Eastern contemplative practices, such as yoga and Buddhism, offer multiple ways to consider human existence through relationship with the self/Self. In the Hindu tradition, *Brahman* and *Atman* can be constructed both within dual and non-dual understandings (Kiseong 2012), and are influenced by monistic metaphysics. In general, metaphysical formations of the self have been discounted by Western scholars. Ho (1995) pointed out that authors regularly speak of the East in global terms, without giving due recognition

to the plethora and intricacies that comprise Eastern thought. I tend to agree with his statement; however, I acknowledge that I am doing exactly what is criticised here—oversimplifying for the purpose of brevity. Therefore, as a generalisation, East/West notions of selfhood vary greatly. However, equally true is that, within Eastern religions and philosophy, the self is constructed in various ways, as is also found in Western religion and philosophy (Ho 1995). In Western conceptions, the self is generally derived as:

an individualist self that is intensely aware of itself, its uniqueness, sense of direction, purpose and volition. It is a centre of awareness, at the core of the individuals' psychological universe ... self and non-self are sharply demarcated: The self is an entity distinct from other selves and all other entities (Ho 1995, p. 128).

Therefore, the differences between the self can be explored through different lenses, which contributes to a rich tapestry to draw on in modern yoga settings. This adds to the eclectic nature of the study of yoga and the complexity upon which this area is built. From this brief examination of some common aspects of Buddhism, I now turn the conversation towards the more niche area of Buddhism, referred to as engaged Buddhism. I believe that engaged Buddhism is the most similar, already established phenomena to engaged yoga. Therefore, I aim to draw on this concept to further understand engaged yoga.

#### **4.6 Socially Engaged Buddhism as a Model for Engaged Yoga**

Buddhism is attributed to the teachings of Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama). Over time, Buddhism has morphed into one of the great religions of the world, with different sects. It is 'a diverse complex of doctrines and institutions, as well as ritual, moral, devotional, and meditational practices ... which focus on the realization of enlightenment' (Mitchell 2002, p. 1). One of the main underpinning philosophies of Gautama's teachings was that of non-self (*anatta*). Non-self refers to there being no spiritual substance, soul or eternal self that endures beyond physical death (Olsen 2009). In a most basic sense, Buddha's teachings present the Four Noble Truths as providing conditions for fruitful living:

- The First Noble Truth is the truth of *dukkha*, which states that ordinary life is dissatisfying. The Buddha does not deny happiness, yet describes it as something that does not last.
- The Second Noble Truth is referred to as the cause of suffering. Literally translated, this is often called ‘thirst’. Thirst refers to the way we tend to continually use self-gratification for a sense of fulfilment. According to Buddha, this thirst manifests in desire, not just as a single phenomenon, but in multiple and conflicting ways.
- The Third Noble Truth is concerned with the cessation of *dukkha* caused by freedom from craving. This state is often referred to as nirvana. There is little consensus about what this nirvana might be, and Buddha did not describe it.
- The Fourth Noble Truth is the Eightfold Path to the cessation of *dukkha*, which includes right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration (Mitchell 2002; Olsen 2009).

A contemporary interpretation of Buddhism can be found in what is termed ‘mindfulness’. The practice of mindfulness has risen from the Buddhist *dharma*. Thich Nhat Hanh (1975), a revered Buddhist teacher and activist, described mindfulness as the ‘energy of being aware and awake to the present moment, comprising of two main elements of non-judgemental awareness and compassion’. Mindfulness derived from Buddhist traditions referring to the development of a spiritual practice, and is closely associated with the practices of asana and meditation (Bodhi 2011; Kabat-Zinn 2013; Lynn & Mensinga 2015). There has been an exponential surge in the applications of mindfulness in areas such as psychology, medicine and sociology (Lynn & Mensinga 2015). In general, these applications of mindfulness are purposefully distanced from the *dharma* teachings of Buddhism. Instead, Western scientific interpretations of mindfulness emphasise the measurement and explanation of mindfulness, alongside creating therapeutic treatments for definable mental health and health issues. Mindfulness-based stress reduction, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and many other varieties of mindfulness have been meshed with medical science. In these forms, mindfulness has gained an evidence-based framework as a complementary approach to work with experiences of stress, pain and illness (Kabat-Zinn 2013).



Engaged Buddhism (also socially engaged Buddhism, life Buddhism and humanistic Buddhism) are all different forms of Buddhism. This demonstrative form of Buddhism emerged during the aftermath of the Vietnam War. During this war, Vietnamese monks inspired engaged Buddhism through Hanh's activism challenges Western duality that attempts to dislocate self and society into a binary position (Kittel 2010). At the same time, this position recognises the inherent ability of the individual to affect large-scale change. For example, if the 'environment' as subject and 'individual' as object are not viewed as separate, then any changes to the individual—either positive or negative—have repercussions for the environment as a whole. In this manner, individual action, such as picking up rubbish, is part of a collective effort to reinvigorate a neighbourhood that has become rundown (Adorjan & Kelly 2008). There is no definitive socially engaged Buddhism; however, as a working definition, Kraft (1999, p. 10) offered: 'engaged Buddhism offers both inner and outer work. We must change the world, we must change ourselves, and we must change ourselves in order to change the world. Awareness and compassionate action reinforce each other'. Hattam (2004) rejected that this is a 'new' form of Buddhism, and argued that 'engagement' has always been central to Buddhism, yet has been more or less prominent depending on the tradition. With the movement of Buddhism into Western culture, there has been ample opportunity to reconceptualise what it means to be a Buddhist practitioner.

The Dalai Lama has used his leadership role to promote a vision of a more compassionate world. His work, which depicts elements of engaged Buddhism, is far reaching in the Buddhist community and the world. His teachings of 'universal responsibility' and the 'basic sameness' of being human are premised on the notion that 'we all desire to be happy and to avoid suffering' (Dalai Lama XIV & Cutler 1999, p. 4). Ultimately, engaged Buddhism is concerned with translating ideas of compassion into actions in the world. Kornfield (2012) explained that there is a relationship between understanding and acting on compassion, and an engaged form of Buddhism enables this to be a framework for Buddhist practice. However, while the Dalai Lama has used his position to influence discussions regarding social and political issues, there are also facets of the Buddhist community that have embraced a more deeply radical concept of engaged Buddhism. This has been most notable in Western constructions of engaged Buddhism, which are referred to as modern reformist movements (King 2005).

Through his demonstration against violence in Vietnam, Hanh (1975) began a prominent Buddhist critique of the power, violence and war he was witnessing. Since the 1970s, there has been growth in his original activism, and socially engaged Buddhism has now been established in parts of Asia, yet more prominently across the Western world. Socially engaged Buddhism is one of the most Western interpretations of Buddhism (Slott 2015), with this form of Buddhism drawing together more Westernised interests in human rights and social justice. Slott (2015) argued that secular and engaged Buddhism both honour Buddhist thoughts about suffering; however, there are ways they diverge from mainstream Buddhist teachings. For example, fully secular Buddhism rejects the notion of an absolute or ultimate reality as either untrue or unproven at this point, and radically engaged Buddhism states that all suffering is caused primarily by individuals' thoughts. However, they acknowledge that individuals contribute to social problems and personal suffering through unskilful thinking, thereby joining the individual experience with the social experience. This is summarised by the following statement:

Radical Buddhists do not dispute that the unskilful thoughts and actions of individuals contribute to social problems such as war and oppression. However, emphasizing the systemic roots of social ills, radically engaged Buddhists contend that a complex dialectic between individuals and society is both the cause of harm and suffering, as well as the basis for a radical social transformation and the flourishing of human beings. In a general sense the 'engaged' nature of this Buddhism is oppositional to the more introspective or contemplative nature of Buddhist practice. This kind of practice asks for the practitioner to disseminate their knowledge of non-duality into the world through social action (Slott 2015, p. 289).

Buddhism is more closely associated with practices that have been popularised in recent times. Mindfulness practices, which are most commonly associated with Buddhist origins, provide fruitful explorative techniques to understand the self in relation to the other. Hanh (1975) described mindfulness as the 'energy of being aware and awake to the present moment, comprising of two main elements of non-judgemental awareness and compassion'. Mindfulness derives from Buddhism traditions and refers to the development of a spiritual practice that is closely associated with the practices of asana and meditation (Bodhi 2011; Kabat-Zinn 2013; Lynn & Mensinga 2015). There has been an exponential surge in the applications of mindfulness in areas such as

psychology, medicine, sociology (Lynn & Mensinga 2015). In general, these applications of mindfulness have been purposefully distanced from the dharma teachings of Buddhism. Instead, Western scientific interpretations of mindfulness emphasise the measurement and explanation of mindfulness, alongside creating therapeutic treatments for definable mental health and health issues. Mindfulness-based stress reduction, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and many other varieties of mindfulness have been meshed with medical science. In these forms, mindfulness has gained an evidence-based framework as a complementary approach to work with experiences of stress, pain and illness (Kabat-Zinn 2013). Mindfulness, yoga and Buddhism can refer to different practices, lineages and teachings; however, they can also refer to similar dharma teachings that are part of the Asian teachings rooted in non-duality, inter-being and oneness.

Obeyeskere (cited in Queen 1996) noted three elements that became apparent in the shift that led to the new paradigm of engaged Buddhism, and this involved shifting from the religious realm to the secular realm. Obeyeskere's observations of the way this occurred were as follows:

- The emergence of a leader who provides a charter for change, a model for emulation and becomes a symbol of a new order;
- Role shifts, specifically a this—worldly asceticism directed toward political and social goals;
- A rationalisation of the religious life, involving the discrediting of religious elements (such as theistic devotionism or ritualism) and an emphasis on mental and moral developments through education and moral living (cited in Queen 1996, p. 5)

Engaged Buddhists in the US have been creative and enterprising, campaigning on issues such as environmental destruction, ending capital punishment, sexism, colonisation and racial oppression (King 2005). There are groups such as the Zen Peace Maker Order and The Turning Wheel, which exemplify the meeting point of interpretation and reinvention of Buddhist practices. However, I briefly point out that there is also tension in the field of engaged Buddhism. Much of this tension derives from unrest because of Western ownership of the development of engaged Buddhism. While I understand when Hanh (1975) emphasises that Buddhism has always been engaged, a more recent exploration reinterprets teachings with specific conditions,

pressures and ideologies—encountered by both Buddhism and yoga—that are specific to their time and cultural positioning. This includes coming directly into contact with a burgeoning area of dynamic activism and contemporary human rights relatedness. The practices of Buddhism and yoga open discussions regarding East/West tensions and hostilities, stereotypes and power. It is by opening this discussion that change can be established status quo.

#### **4.7 Opening to Secular Spirituality**

Studies on non-dual awareness have been rooted in many philosophies, including Hindu Vedanta, sects of Buddhism and Taoism, mystical Christianity, Judaism and Islam (Prendergast 2003). Yoga is not necessarily non-dual; however, it has often been blended with non-dual belief systems. Loy alluded to the importance and ambiguity here:

there is no concept more important in Asian philosophy and religious thought than non-duality (in Sanskrit called *advaya* and *advaita*) and none is more ambiguous. The term has been used in many different related ways, and to my knowledge the distinctions between these meanings have never been fully clarified (1998, p. 17).

He furthered this statement by asserting that three areas of non-duality may be identified, and these areas are interrelated and overlapping. They are described generally as negation of dualistic thinking, non-plurality of the world, and non-difference of subject and object.

In addition to Loy (1998), Wilbur (1996 p. 26) described non-dual awareness as ‘the sense of a dissolved separate self or ego, and a new sense of connectedness and oneness that encompasses the totality of existence as one and the same’. Duality forms the basis for much Western thought, including many aspects of Christianity. This dualism is reiterated through such divisions as god–human being, spirit–nature, heaven–earth and victim–oppressor (Gregory & Samah 2008). A recent phenomenological study by Tzu, Bannerman and Griffith (2015, p. 758) positioned non-dual transformation as ‘movement into non-dual awareness ... beyond the ego or self and access to higher transpersonal levels or stages. This comprises a process that manifests as an awakening and can initiate a lengthy journey for the experiences’. However as previously stated, simply allocating yoga as a non-dual practice is highly problematic. Carrette and Kind

(2005) stated that modern yoga largely reinforces the Cartesian mind/body split. This may be partly attributable to the melting pot of influences to which modern yoga and its participants are subject at any given time, and includes preoccupation with the medicalisation of yoga knowledge. Whatever the underlying reasons, it is clear that not all yoga is non-dual.

It is critical to point out that non-dual schools of thought do not attempt to deny the dual relative world with which we are familiar. This is generally the belief that we are a world of discrete objects, interacting causally in space and time. Loy (1998, p. 3) established that this is common sense, and that non-duality does not attempt to explain this away, but add to it and enrich the dualistic experience. Non-dual understandings are also found in areas such as the foundation for transpersonal psychology. Grouped together, transpersonal psychology is based on non-dual consciousness as experienced beyond the ego-identity:

Non-dual awareness is characterised by the sense of a dissolved separate self or ego and a new sense of connectedness and oneness that encompasses the extraordinary and the ordinary, or the supernatural and the mundane, as one and the same. This oneness can be viewed as a complete integration of formlessness and form that embraces all levels as they arise in consciousness, wherein one is now able to enjoy the suchness of all levels and let go of attachment to existence, no matter how it manifests (Tzu, Bannerman & Griffin 2015, p. 760).

Ross (2013) pointed out that attaining non-dual embodied experience often occurs after a radical enquiry into the reality of one's own self. This radical enquiry can be seen manifested in previous iterations of yoga, where seekers attempted to grapple with the questions of their divinity and humanity. Through this enquiry, the sense of individual separate existence is exposed as illusory. It is a dismantling of the dualistic notion of an independent subject and object. The influence of such awareness may not be able to be qualified in the most rational ways; however, the change in space that this can cause will reverberate in one's life. This is often an experience that can be cultivated through breath and yogic practices. Therefore, it is possible that some of those who appear to be practising engaged yoga do so from a non-dual experience, yet this is not necessarily the case. Non-duality can have some unhealthy interpretations that can leave one open to what Loy (1990, p. 66) referred to as the 'nihilistic destruction of the small self'; however, inter-being simultaneously recognises the individual self as part of the

collective whole. Inter-being and non-dual oneness in some respects provide an alternative to the limited ontologies that have dominated rational, medical, neoliberal interpretations of the self. The space that inter-being creates does not preclude the small life that one lives within one's own skin. A non-dual self encounter, when more deeply embedded in one's life, is a simultaneous sensitisation to one's own experience, as well as a richly imbued knowing of other.

In Western settings, non-dual interpretations of the self are often associated with secular spirituality; however, this is not always the case (du Tuit 2006). Broadly speaking, du Tuit (2006) referred to secular spirituality as a phenomenon that turns away from institutionalised and structured religions, and the rise in the use of the term itself is indicative of the experience of spiritual poverty in current society. Observable in some areas of the yoga community is the development of modern secular spirituality; however, also discernible is yoga being joined with religious spiritualities. Secular spirituality is a broad area that encompasses much territory; thus, it is difficult to pin down or define. Walach suggested that secular spirituality refers to:

being consciously related to a reality that transcends the ego and its goals ... this definition of spirituality is built upon direct, unmediated experience of an absolute reality that is beyond the experiencing self. This experience will not necessarily be expressed in previously known terminologies, and often can't be (2015, p. 18).

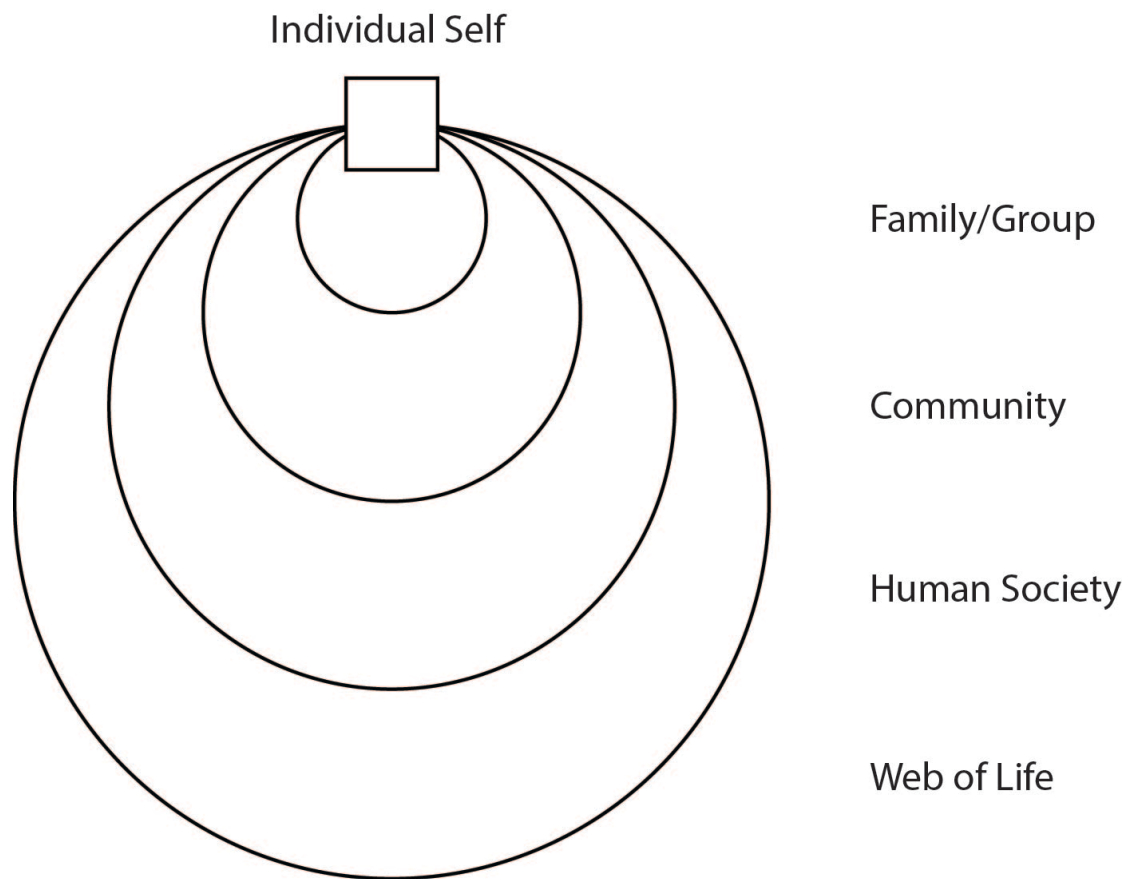
Secular spirituality is often criticised by philosophers and indeed the broader community as a reinvention of the religious worldview from which they turned away (Bishop 2010). Spirituality free from religion institutions could enable reclamation of empowerment and agency. It also provides the scope to develop one's own meaning of spirituality. I agree with Solomon in his description of spirituality in terms of trust:

Cultivated trust is an essential part of spirituality. But spirituality should not be confused with a self confidence that is limited to confidence in one's abilities and skills for making one's way in the world. Trust in the world includes acceptance of a lack of control and the recognition of one's vulnerability ... we cultivate trust even in face our recognition that a person or even a 'best possible' world is impossible (2002, p. 46).

Growth in secular spirituality has also caused a growth of disillusion for some particularly critiqued based on seekers focus on themselves. Grassow (1991, p. 53)

supported this through his observation that ‘the spiritual experience was never an end in itself. Any spirituality that does not produce service is false’. I have observed that engaged yoga appears to be developing outside of religious or institutional settings; however, it draws upon an overt spirituality. Given the possible eclectic conglomeration of spiritual and religious beliefs, I anticipate that this could be problematic for engaged yoga, as well as an expression of collective diversity. However, at face value, in terms of the work of engaged yoga, one of the observable features is its central focus on service to others.

Macy & Johnstone’s (2012) model of non-dual oneness (in Figure 4.2) provides a reconfiguration of the individual self in relation to other. Non-duality establishes the ‘individual self’ as part of the collective, and extends the collective beyond borders and even beyond the usual micro, mezzo and macro models (which are mentioned in the upcoming chapter in terms of a non-hierarchical change process), which often stops well before ‘the web of life’. Models that stop at the community level or consider humans abstracted from environment and deep connection falsely premise the human as an individual entity floating in an unconnected cosmos. In this type of model, the way we define ‘self-interest’ is generated by the underlying premise of what it meant by ‘self’. By challenging the premise of ‘self’, Macy & Johnstone (2012) challenged us to let go of the binary position between selfishness and altruism. When we recognise the connected self, we can see that this split is mere illusion. This creates space to act beyond morality ‘because we should’ and from a place of loving connection purely because of its beauty (Macy & Johnstone 2012). The connected cosmos encompasses language and understanding that may prove more difficult to conceptually understand; however, through the experiential process that yoga can create, this understanding may develop.



We are part of widening circles.

**Figure 4.2: Macy and Johnstone's Model of Non-dual Oneness**

#### **4.8 Reaching an Emerging View of Engaged Yoga**

Engaged yoga is a visible form of yoga that is well underway and particularly observable in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, as well as other countries. Upon initial observation, there appears to be a simultaneous implosion that has developed through the burgeoning of yoga and its collision with the already well-developed language of human rights relatedness, activism and practices. In Chapter 2, I argued that human rights is not the work of one field—instead, it is constructed through multiple disciplines and frameworks that all have value once they are deeply connected to human understanding. Thus, engaged yoga is a melting pot of possibilities and potential. It should not be pinned down, but observed as it continues to change shape and direction.



Research regarding engaged yoga as an overall approach is limited, and the words ‘engaged yoga’ appear to be peripheral to most commonly held understandings of yoga. The already established forms of yoga include fitness practice, mental health intervention, treatment for psoriasis, esoteric teachings of the self/Self and New Age spirituality. In addition to these forms is engaged yoga. Thus, it is imperative that some attention be devoted to this field so it can be more readily understood. This paper represents some of the first research seeking to draw on the term engaged yoga; thus, it is vital that it considers examples of the ways practitioners are employing this concept for themselves. Through the use of the engaged yoga programs currently being offered, one can begin to see the aspects that create this engaged intersection.

I assert that engaged yoga is a ‘ground-up’ initiative. This means that the approach to engaged yoga is being initiated by activists and communities, and not as a ‘top-down’ approach that is aligned with institutions and organisations. I discussed in Chapter 3 that the human rights project must be grounded in meaningful ways in people’s lives. It cannot be abstract—someone else’s business or the work of institutions. This is the space that I believe so intimately connects yoga and human rights. Yoga has the potential to fill this space of intimacy and connection with the authenticity that I believe is so needed in the area of human rights. They have collided perhaps in the haphazard fashion that could be expected of yoga; however, this coupling is not just accidental. I believe that it is the necessary missing link needed to be able to connect more deeply with their own and others’ human condition. It is being driven through the actions of communities, practitioners, teachers and activists in the yoga community. Returning briefly to the argument outlined in the previous chapter, which concluded that the project of human rights must be informed by initiatives that are meaningful in the lives of everyday people, I begin to position engaged yoga not merely as a new manifestation of yoga, but also as a dynamic merging with the area of human rights activism. Given the difficulties that have faced the area of human rights scholarship, there is a dire need for people to begin to understand their position in the world.

My initial observations are that yoga is again morphing into yet another yoga offering, as has occurred since the first notions of yoga appeared in the Indus Valley civilisation. However, this morphing does not refer to a seamless exchange of yoga. It refers to a disruption, challenge and potential renewal of what is meant by yoga. This offers a

different opportunity to explore the ideas of human rights through a bodily expression of common humanity.

## **4.9 Conclusion**

This research is situated within the web of contradiction of yoga as an ancient and wise practice, a modern fitness phenomena and an emerging biomedical adjunct treatment. Alter (2005) stated that the current focus on secularising and rationalising yoga is at odds with the simultaneous interest in yoga's esoteric. As pointed out at other points, this is complex, yet also a source of fascination. Alter concluded that we could spend time:

endlessly arguing that one perspective is right and the other is wrong; that yoga is either inherently magical, mystical and esoteric, or natural, healthy and curative; that it can be explained by a science other than itself or that it can not (2005 p. 62).

It is within the space of tension articulated by Alter (2005) that this research rests. I do not seek to expound one 'correct' form of yoga, but examine the way in which yoga has developed into the new form of engaged yoga.

As stated previously, yoga involves connecting with the desire to live with authenticity. The quest for authenticity seems to reside more in the practitioner than in the practice. It is of interest that, to be considered authentic in this area, teachers have relied on a sloppily recreated history, rather than an experience of self-understanding and belief. It appears that much of modern yoga has become dominated by ensuring that the story of yoga seems plausible and authentic, rather than emphasising teachers' and students' goal of embodying authenticity. Authenticity is dynamic, can only be found in the present moment and relies on no specific text or certain practice to give legitimacy. Authenticity is not static—it must morph and be reconceptualised through new moments in time. I speculate that this continual recreation of authenticity causes the transformations of yoga.

Instead of a linear process to be followed, yoga is more of a river with many streams that flow into and outward from its source. While some of the streams border on ridiculous, I believe that there are also others that are helpful. Despite my opinions, they all exist on the same 'river' and subsequently comprise modern yoga. While this study

was contextualised in Chapter 1 as being an encounter of East and West, it may be more fitting to establish engaged yoga as an encounter between East, West, North and South. The permeability demonstrated by engaged yoga contrasts the way some earlier iterations of human rights have been interpreted. Thus, the fluidity of engaged yoga is seen as a vital source of nourishment for the project of human rights, which I view as stagnant and unable to grow because of the restrictive pressures placed upon it. Establishing modern yoga as a conglomerate approach under continual reconceptualisation means that this study is changing and growing yoga, as I write and you read. However, engaged yoga is not merely growth in the area of modern yoga—it also affects other disciplines by drawing yoga deeper into connection with its modern counterparts in human rights. For human rights to be an area that is compelling and useful, the conversations of human wellbeing, dignity and justice must be interwoven in the fabric of everyday life. My belief is that, for some people, including myself, there has been a missing piece in the human rights jigsaw. I suggest that engaged yoga may provide a way to convert the ideals of human rights into actions, projects, classes and offerings, within which questions of one's own humanity and others' humanity can be contemplated. This presents many exciting opportunities and the vast potential for growth.

From this chapter, I now move to the case studies to present the ways in which activists have been grappling with the fraught tensions and exciting possibilities of activating human rights through the practice of engaged yoga. The following chapter illustrates the data collected from a variety of formats that were collated into case studies and are presented in this paper as discrete case examples.

## **Chapter 5: Presenting the Case Studies**

This chapter presents the empirical data collected for the thesis. As aforementioned (Chapter 2), this research endeavoured to uncover the way human rights are activated through yoga. This value is determined through a research methodology that is qualitative, phenomenological and based on eight individual case studies. The emphasis is on textual descriptions of the data. Therefore, this chapter presents the actual case studies that comprise the data of this thesis.

Within this chapter, the lived experiences of merging of yoga and human rights is told through the case studies from Sarah, Hala, Jessica, Jill, Narayan, Seane, Molly and Andi. These are the participants' real names, which were provided for publication by the participants. From the case studies, the emerging themes of the research are developed by using the process described in Chapter 2.

## **5.1 Presenting Case Studies**

The chapter is divided into sections, with each case study presented independently following a similar outline. To present the data, the questions from the in-depth interviews were used to provide an outline for the case studies. Each interview started with 'in the beginning', which established the interview as a chronology. This chronology is inexact, yet is an attempt to compile information in a manner that it is helpful to the reader. Subheadings are used to capture the idiosyncratic breadth of individual cases. The case studies often fit neatly into the categories of the subheadings; however, at times, the fit was not so neat. Thus, occasionally, subject headings are condensed into one to avoid unnecessary repetition. The eight subheadings are explained below, and then used in each case study throughout the chapter.

### **5.1.1 Overview of the Participants' Background**

This section contains a brief synopsis of the participants' age, gender and cultural background. It also outlines their educational background and current areas of activism and teaching.

### **5.1.2 Sources of Data**

This section refers to the way the data were captured specifically for each case. Each participant completed an in-depth interview. This section also includes data from other sources, such as online writing, published materials (such as books), recorded interviews, personal websites, course content, and participation in courses and programs developed and delivered by the participants.

### **5.1.3 In the Beginning**

This section traces the way that each participant discovered yoga and human rights. It presents data that capture the life circumstances that drew the participants towards these fields.

#### **5.1.4 Working with Difficulties**

This section captures any of the personal and professional difficulties that the participants shared, and the ways the participants approached working with these difficulties, including the strategies they used and knowledge they gained.

#### **5.1.5 Transformations**

This section presents data regarding the way the participants reported that they had grown or changed.

#### **5.1.6 Translating the Personal Journey into Social Justice and Human Rights**

In this section, the participants explain and demonstrate the way that their personal journey can be translated into the way that they express and work in the area of human rights and social justice.

#### **5.1.7 Listening for the Value**

This section discusses how the participants report and demonstrate the value of the relationship between yoga and human rights.

#### **5.1.8 Summary of the Participant's Experience**

This section provides a general summary of the case study, highlighting the pertinent points and some differences that emerge in each specific case study.

After each case study is presented, the analysed data are synthesised into themes and subthemes (using the process outlined in Chapter 2). The emergent themes are drawn out and then posed as discussion headings to lead to the discussions in Chapters 6 and 7. The themes become the basis of the components which inform the framework of engaged yoga, presented in the final chapters of this thesis.

### **5.2 Case Study 1: Sarah**

### **5.2.1 Brief Overview of Sarah's Background**

Sarah is a 34-year-old white Australian woman who is an activist with Off the Mat Into the World. She describes her yoga activism as an eclectic mix of interpersonal group therapeutic work and creative enterprise. Her focus is broad; however, her areas of interest include adult mental health and body image. She has an undergraduate degree in visual arts and a postgraduate degree in art therapy, and is currently finishing a Master of Social Work. Sarah is a qualified yoga teacher and long-term practitioner. She recently spent a year offering trauma-sensitive yoga to 300 young people recovering from trauma and psychosocial difficulties, with a not-for-profit organisation in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

### **5.2.2 Sources of Data**

The sources of data for this case study included:

- in-depth Skype interview completed 16 August 2014
- reading Sarah's personal website Ball, S n.d.. *Sarah Ball*, [accessed 20 April 2016, http://www.sarahball.com.au](http://www.sarahball.com.au)

### **5.2.3 In the Beginning**

Sarah experienced difficulties early in her life, stemming from the separation of her parents when she was aged five. She connected to the practice of yoga when she was just 11 years old. Sarah read about yoga and then saw an advertisement for children's yoga classes, and was very interested to try them. In her memories, the yoga classes felt very safe and she felt nurtured and held. This experience was memorable.

When Sarah started high school, she practised yoga early in the mornings among adults. The community was very important to her during this stage of her life. When Sarah was 15, she again relocated—this time to live with her father in the Southern Highlands, south of Sydney. They lived on a property outside of town and there were no local yoga classes. Sarah practised at home occasionally. During this time, she began to develop anorexia, and part of this involved using the principles she had learnt in yoga to be self-destructive. She realised that she turned the teachings of yoga into the rituals of her eating disorder.

#### **5.2.4 Working with Difficulties**

Sarah reported difficulties beginning early in her life, which extended into adulthood:

So for me the decline into abusing my body began through trying to cling onto yoga, what I had known to be so fulfilling. I had this little book of yoga principles and it had detoxifications in it and some other physical practices. I'd sort of play with these things, but eventually they became obsessive and I got quite ill, all under the auspices of yoga.

During these years, Sarah stated that her relationship with yoga was abusive and part of ingrained self-purification based on shame and hatred. During her teenage years, Sarah suffered from depression, anorexia, bulimia and compulsive eating. She suspects that she had been depressed since childhood. At age 17, Sarah left school and decided to undertake training to become a yoga teacher at the Nature Care College in Sydney. However, after 1.5 years of study, she realised the discipline was too overwhelming for her, and she left the course:

I was too young and I wasn't ready for it. I wanted to go and smoke cigarettes and drink red wine and stay up until 5.30 am, instead of getting up at 5.30 am! So that's what I did. I went off and had several years of debauchery.

Sarah eventually began other studies and lost contact with yoga as she found that she could not recreate the community experience she previously had. She was still struggling with significant mental health problems. When she did occasionally attend a yoga class, she found the experience of being in her body overwhelming: 'There was just so much shame in my body that to actually be on the mat felt almost unbearable for me'. Around this time, Sarah was placed on the bipolar spectrum as the depression she experienced developed into unmanageable highs and lows in mood. She sought multiple treatments for this, and eventually found her way back to yoga.

#### **5.2.5 Transformations**

Sarah experienced significant periods of suffering in her early life. To begin healing, she spent time contemplating the way her experiences have shaped her outlook towards life. She chose to work with the difficulties in her life by gradually lowering reliance on the coping mechanisms that kept her trapped in her own cycle of self-hatred.

One of the main lessons that Sarah discusses in her teaching is that yoga is not inherently healing. She is adamant that this can be a misconception perpetuated in the yoga community. Sarah is passionate about teaching students and other teachers that yoga, like anything, can be used for both harm and good. She draws on her experience of using the practices of yoga as a factor that led to developing an eating disorder:

The more I enquire through my yoga practice, and this really does inform my human rights work, is that I come to understand more and more intimately that nothing is inherent to anything. So there's no inherent evil, there's no inherent good, there's no inherent brokenness and no inherent wholeness. It just doesn't exist. There is so much flux.

By placing this central to her work, Sarah has chosen to be vocal about challenging yoga as a 'glossy' practice, and instead highlights it as realistic and with limitations:

When I run workshops, most women in the room believe that it's inherently wrong that they're using food or restricting food or whatever they're doing. However, it is possible to come to see this as a coping mechanism they have developed. It's not inherently wrong to develop coping strategies, but it's not inherently right either, it just is.

Sarah has learnt over time to manage the highs and lows that she can experience because of bipolar disorder. This has partly been through the regular support of yoga practice. She has also recovered from disordered eating, and part of this recovery was achieved by regaining trust in herself, using yoga practice as a support.

#### **5.2.6 Translating the Personal Journey into Social Justice and Human Rights**

The pivotal change for Sarah occurred through finding a value-based framework to which she could connect. She found this in yoga practice, and uses this both personally and professionally. When Sarah discusses yoga, she is mainly referring to the ethical framework of the *yamas* and *niyamas*.

The *yamas* and *niyamas* (which were outlined earlier), or the ethics that underpin yoga, offer Sarah a way to navigate through her life, including the way she offers her services in the world:



I have found that the Western framework doesn't offer me very clear moral nets or anything to rest into [not being invested in structured religious practice]. So a yoga moral net became the framework for me, where I could moderate and make decisions around what would be supportive, rather than going purely for the Samadhi or rejecting the whole thing and dwelling in the suffering.

Sarah demonstrated that, for her, the 'moral net' was a missing part of the puzzle, which helped her connect self and other. She stated that this was missing in her Western upbringing, and then transferred into her professional life. By gravitating towards yoga practices, she has extended her reach into Eastern practices and philosophies to guide her own ethical framework.

Sarah has created a successful small business by drawing these experiences together and creating diverse ways to share her knowledge with others. One such offering is the Body Love Yoga workshop, which she has hosted in many cities and towns across Australia since 2012. She has also developed an eight-week course called Yoga for Depression and Anxiety. In these courses, she combines elements from yoga, counselling and reflective art therapies as tools to lead therapeutic sessions, while also educating the yoga community about the potential dangers of succumbing to disordered body image as a part of yoga practice. Sarah's relationship with human rights is accessed through supporting people with poor mental health to find better quality of life. Her work is often individually focused; nevertheless, she asserts that this work is essential to human rights because it supports others with the endeavour of healing. The other main area of her activism involves supporting women to develop appreciation for their bodies. She advocates for greater awareness in the yoga community regarding the effect of the challenges that many people face in accepting their bodies. She supports her students to freely inhabit their bodily space in a way that is open and loving. She links this to the area of women's rights and the larger human rights project.

#### **5.2.7 Listening for the Value**

For Sarah, the beginning point of social justice is grounded in ethics. Attaining an ethical framework is part of her personal journey; however, it is also the way she extends that beyond herself and out into the world:

It's the yamas and the niyamas—these frameworks offer me ways of seeing what it is that I might be doing and how I can moderate and make choices that would support myself, but also allows me to be service through human rights work because otherwise I'm useless—absolutely bloody useless.

Sarah stressed the importance of self-care in the area of social justice and human rights. When working in a not-for profit in Cambodia, the need for self-care and to understand her limits and boundaries was highlighted. This year, she found herself in a leadership position at a busy not-for-profit organisation. She was removed from her regular support systems and felt alienated from the expatriate community. Sarah found that she needed to draw a line between the issues for her and the issues for the community. This involved being able to implement healthy boundaries so that she could function well:

Joanna Macy's work is what got me through the suffering I witnessed in Cambodia and the confusion around that ... I learned that sometimes distraction is healthy ... I have a tendency, particularly through my training, to want to be fully present at all times. Sometimes this is unbearable. I'd be walking around a museum with tears running down my face and goose-bumps all over my body and be feeling sick. I learned that I was actually punishing myself.

Here, Sarah discussed learning boundaries, which applied to her work and personal situations, and was connected to understanding how she would interact with people who were suffering, while still maintaining her own wellbeing. She demonstrated that, through her practice of mindfulness, she noticed that she was drawn to connecting deeply with suffering. This awareness gave her the space to choose the activities in which she participated. This required her to relearn some of the ways she had interpreted her formal training. She called this 'healthy distance', which is the ability to interact with people who are suffering without needing to activate one's own experiences of suffering. She stated that this is self-caring, compassionate and helpful for sustainable activism and stable mental health. This highlights Sarah's awareness of the potential for her compassion for others to be misconstrued into an unhealthy interpretation that supports her old wounds and reinforces unhelpful ways of acting. Learning how to protect herself while being supportive to others created an opportunity to become compassionate.

Sarah reported that she was sensitive to injustice early in her life; however, she stated that this was not necessarily based on compassion. She suspected that this was based on her own sensitivity and the need to protect others from perceived hurt or harm. She often found herself intervening before the involved parties were able to respond:

It's only really in recent years that I've learned the difference between compassion and patronisation—it is so easy to patronise people or populations based on compassion. 'Those less fortunate than me' ... is a term I find very grating now, very perplexing and I probably used it myself sometime without realising it, before I knew a little bit more about social equality.

With the insight of personal experience, professional practice and education, Sarah has combined her knowledge to become an activist specifically in relation to body image in yoga. This has been directly informed through her experiences of using yoga teachings as a justification for disordered eating. In her public speaking and teaching, she advocates for the community to become more inclusive in accepting different bodies and to understand the way that yoga can reinforce a bodily stereotype, based on predominant archetypes of beauty. Her journey has involved intimate learning and courageous action to share her experiences with others.

Sarah demonstrated that, overall, the value she found by joining these areas is to undertake practices that promote self-care and sustainable action. She acknowledged that working with other people who are suffering is difficult for her, and, to achieve this in any supportive manner, she must look after herself. Yoga has been part of her life and is a crucial way, but not the only way, that she cares for her own emotional and mental health. Self-awareness learnt through yoga has also directly supported her healing. Therefore, she has gone on to share this with others so they can benefit from this practice. She has also found a direct useful connection between yoga and supporting women to experience self-compassion and body acceptance. Sarah also continually draws on philosophies of yoga to provide a daily framework for her life, including social justice and human rights work. This is the way that she has chosen to navigate ethical questions.

### **5.2.8 Summary**

Sarah speaks and writes about the relationship between the self and other as being intertwined. She clearly places the relationship she has with herself as central to the project of human rights. This is not a hedonistic approach, but an approach that appreciates her own experiences of suffering and her openness about these experiences as part of the flow of human life. Sarah experienced early difficulties, a mental health diagnosis, disordered eating and a limited understanding of her own needs, and eventually transformed these experiences into an offering that she hopes can help others in similar circumstances.

## **5.3 Case Study 2: Hala**

### **5.3.1 Brief Overview of Hala's Background**

Hala is a 41-year-old American woman, born in Lebanon. She is the mother of two young sons. She has been teaching movement arts, including yoga, for over 20 years. She has a Bachelor and Master of Counselling Psychology. In general, she specialises in trauma-informed somatic therapies, including trauma-informed yoga. In this area, her specialisations are trauma-informed yoga teaching and the area of body image and yoga. She has been influential in engaging the yoga community in discussions regarding gender, race, ability and sexuality. Hala is a member of the not-for-profit organisation, A Thousand Joys, which works with social workers and provides direct service to users who experience vicarious trauma. She teaches internationally in many yoga teacher trainings and workshops.

### **5.3.2 Sources of Data**

The sources of data for this case study included:

- an in-depth telephone interview conducted on 15 August 2015
- Hala's website Khouri, H 2012, *Hala Khouri*, accessed 27 October 2017, <http://www.halakhouri.com>
- Khouri, H n.d. *Yoga for stress reduction; simple techniques to manage and release stress with Hala Khouri, M.A.*

### **5.3.3 In the Beginning and Working with Difficulties**

Hala's interest in yoga began when she was at college. She took a yoga class and thought it was much too slow for her; however, she immediately noticed that the teacher was different to other people. She had no words to describe it at the time. On reflection, she believes she had met someone who was very 'grounded':

There was a way that she inhabited her body that was really grounded and self-regulated and I did not have that. I was struggling with a sugar addiction and was exercising because I felt guilty about it ... The irony was that I was studying psychology and yet I had this big internal struggle inside of myself around just how I felt in my own skin.

At this time in her life, Hala surmised that she had a distanced relationship with herself. She struggled with any sense of personal intimacy: 'I couldn't tolerate really being with myself'. Hala briefly discussed the attitude that often characterises people who have a tendency to work in the helping professions. She called it 'irony' that, while she was studying psychology, she was also experiencing internal difficulty.

In addition to her internal struggle, around this time, Hala was diagnosed with precancerous cells on her cervix. She viewed this news as a wake-up call to begin thinking more holistically about health and wellness. Prior to this, she was addicted to sugar and exercise, and more interested in the way her body looked, rather than the experience of being in her body and feeling comfortable. Her diagnosis was a catalyst to begin to challenge what health actually meant to Hala. This involved becoming much more interested in yoga as a way of life, and led Hala into a series of investigations about herself, the world in which she lived, and the relationship between the two.

#### **5.3.4 Transformations**

Hala stated that the emphasis of her practice and the way she practised changed. Mindfulness became central, and she aimed to draw this into her life as much as possible. She was not interested in mastering difficult physical postures, as she once was. This was demonstrated by her emphasis on change from 'doing' to 'being': 'I'm understanding now that just having a practice of being present in one's body is what is important and it doesn't actually have to be yoga'. Hala is interested in the way that yoga occurs 'off the mat'. To her, this is the powerful part of the practice. Her increased

level of self-awareness has helped her see the places and things that she avoided in her life:

I see that so many of the ways that we suffer are connected to ways that we're avoiding being with ourselves, whether it's our addictions or suffering in our relationships, or in our ability to just be with [ourselves].

Hala wrote:

Maybe this was you; maybe this is you. The mala bead wearing, namaste talkin', slightly arrogant, super neurotic, I-never-eat-meat-refined-flour-or-non-organic-food, type. The person who looks down on anyone who doesn't do yoga, isn't vegan, has 'negative energy' or has a corporate job. I know this person because this person was me. When I lived in New York City, I would pause when I walked by a McDonald's and pray for the people inside. I prayed that they would find enlightenment and stop eating such low quality food made with tortured animals and additives. Then I would walk off, feeling better than everyone and very satisfied with myself. You see, yogis don't overtly judge—we cover it up in spiritual guise.

Hala saw that she used spirituality to boost her own flailing self-esteem, and it took her some years to be able to admit this was her own issue and was the way she dealt with her feelings of unworthiness. She sees this aim for spiritual 'perfection' commonly in the yoga community. She finds it problematic—a part of perfectionism and an obsession with over-achieving.

Hala believes that yoga is part of an overall change in her lifestyle; however, it is clear that this is just one of the ways she has chosen to care for herself. She has found combining the practice of mindfulness and somatic experiencing to be powerful for self-growth. When she began to link the two areas about 10 years ago, she started to experience deep changes:

So that [somatic experiencing] took it to the next level. It was this understanding that meant the way we are present in our bodies deeply influences how we engage in the world. It's connected to our unresolved traumas, it's connected to our resilience.

Hala has two young sons and stated that becoming a mother has, in some ways, been an 'obstacle' to her practice:

Since having children, it's been where I actually utilise my practice the most and need to be doing more. I think I get caught up in mothering and in taking care of these other beings and attuning to them and giving to them. It has made it harder for me to actually make the time to be practising.

Hala recently started attending therapeutic individual sessions to restore balance. She has found that being a mother, trauma therapist and yoga teacher requires her to give a great deal to others and always hold space for others. To counter-balance this, she attends therapeutic sessions so that someone can hold space for her. This is part of her commitment to self-care, and is important to sustain the work she does with others.

### **5.3.5 Translating the Personal Journey into Social Justice and Human Rights**

Hala described that she always was drawn to social justice principles. During high school, she began to volunteer at a shelter for children. Later in college, she helped start a rape crisis centre. She stated that she believes her ethnicity was partly the reason for this early awakening to marginalisation. Hala's family immigrated to the US from Lebanon; thus, she has often experienced being 'on the margins': 'I always wanted to work with people that had been marginalised and that was really unconscious'.

On reflection, Hala sees that, although she had experiences of marginalisation in her childhood, she also had privilege, such as access to good schools and all of her needs met by her family and community. She articulated that attending college in New York City opened her eyes to the variety of life experiences of other people. Upon moving to Los Angeles after college, she immediately began to gravitate towards working with homeless children. She found that, given her educational opportunity and immigrant background, she was able to fit into many different community groups and discuss oppression and privilege with a personal vantage point, as well as objectivity and professional expertise. She also found that the interpersonal trauma framework from her psychology background was extremely useful in community education settings to help people living with adversity.

However, Hala also reported that much of the activism in her earlier life was based on separation and the need to be 'correct' at all times. She stated that this was alienating and she was in constant battles and experienced burnout. Yoga was incredibly supportive for her so that she could see how attached to 'fighting' she was:

I was really attached to fighting the fight, which was brutally ineffective. I alienated a lot of people through that. I started to do my own practice and I started to look at: okay, how much of this is my adolescent or my inner child wanting to lash out from anger? How do I approach these issues in a mature way that isn't about making somebody else wrong so I can feel right?

Hala credits the space created through yoga to begin working with her many emotions, particularly anger. She says she did not learn early in her life to express anger in a healthy manner. This inability in her early life affected the way she became an activist:

I wouldn't say that it was the yoga itself. It was the combination of yoga movement therapy and psychotherapy. So yoga and then the awareness I was getting in therapy allowed me to feel my body and to befriend it and to find a really healthy expression of it that I didn't associate with danger or ammunition.

Hala stated that, in terms of self-awareness, she draws on a combination of approaches that she has found to be most useful. Yoga and mindfulness practices enabled her to become aware that she used specific behaviours to avoid difficult feelings. Understanding this created a place for her to choose to respond and work in creative ways with difficult emotions and experiences:

The irony is that my practice has allowed me to be able to sit with my discomfort and realise that it doesn't have to be constantly suffering. I always say I think suffering is what happens when we avoid our pain. Suffering is being caught in addiction or isolation or alienation and then, when we can just be with our pain, our suffering decreases. The pain might be there, but the suffering decreases.

Hala demonstrated that becoming embodied and supporting others to live with connection to the experiences of the mind, heart and body are directly related to the way she supports social justice and human rights. She teaches that trauma dislocates humans from being able to access their inner world and flourish. Therefore, treating trauma through individual sessions in community education programs is core human rights work.

### **5.3.6 Listening for the Value**



In general, Hala described that coming to know herself more fully was facilitated partly through yoga. This brought her directly into contact with the way that she tended to create stories to avoid suffering:

I think that when we can acknowledge our own vulnerabilities, our own shadow, we can have compassion for other people that are in pain ... I spent a long time using my 'spiritual practice' to think that I'm better than everybody and to avoid pain. I created a magical belief that I'm above suffering that ordinary people experience. It was very much a defence and it created a lot of separation for me to think I'm better than everybody.

Eventually, with practice, she was able to see that this was not an accurate account of her life: 'So as I was acknowledging my own vulnerability, my own capacity to suffer or have pain and then having compassion for that for myself. It then allowed me to have authentic compassion for others'. Hala stated that learning self-compassion is critical in the process of being compassionate towards others. This is a demonstrative link between the inner work of yoga and the outer action of human rights. In terms of an overall link, Hala placed 'human rights' as central to humanity through the words 'taking responsibility':

The main thing yoga can offer social justice is a practice that holds us accountable for ourselves. I think that people doing social justice work can create separation or siding where we want to be right. Social justice is about holding everyone in our hearts, not just the oppressed, but the oppressor, and when we can do that, that's when we are ready to succeed in this work. I think that that's very, very hard to do!

This view offers a universal understanding of human rights, whereby every person is entitled to belong. In addition, Hala emphasised self-care as the foundation for working in the trauma, social justice and human rights fields. This is essential for human rights workers, and Hala also stated that it is critical to make the work more effective:

it's a practice that allows us to be sustainable. It's also a practice of self-care, or releasing vicarious trauma stress from the body so that the tool—right, our instrument is our body—and the more we're taking care of that instrument, the better we're going to be at communication, engagement and clear thinking.

The process of personal healing is integral to being able to be supportive and provide a healing space for others. Hala indicated that this personal ‘work’ is part of her own commitment to social justice. It is not the only commitment, but it is one that she sees as part of her contribution. She stated: ‘For me, yoga is a tool for self-awareness. When we are self-aware, we can cultivate compassion. Compassion for ourselves is where it starts; if we don’t have that, we’re destined to idealise or demonise others’. This cultivation of compassion is her central contribution to the human endeavour. From a basis of compassion, she moved to ‘practising justice’. In this manner, she positioned the idea of human rights as existing within bodies and communities. This demonstrates human rights as action:

Yoga practice can also be a practice of community building and a way to be together in a space with people and moving our bodies and breathing, and even creating rituals together. I’m interested and curious in how we can build our yoga studios as centres in communities, as places for community, and places to practice justice. There is something levelling when we are in our bodies.

### **5.3.7 Summary**

Hala has an interpersonal and relational exploration of human rights. Her main focus in this interview was a human rights approach that involved being able to offer herself in an authentic way to support the growth of other people. While she is interested in speaking about social justice, her way of offering this to the world is through her work with people who have experienced trauma. Therefore, her approach is practical and supported through psychology, as much as a social justice framework. Hala clearly articulated that, to be compassionate to others, she had to learn how to be compassionate to herself.

## **5.4 Case Study 3: Jessica**

### **5.4.1 Brief Overview of Jessica’s Background**

Jessica has a dual Master of Social Work and Public Policy, and has at least 15 years of experience working directly with people experiencing adversity. Specifically, she specialises in working with young people who have emotional disorders, are experiencing the effects of trauma, or are at risk of trauma or violence. She is also a

trained yoga teacher and the Executive Director of Street Yoga—a not-for-profit organisation specifically for young people who require access to services such as yoga. She believes that everyone should be able to access the benefits of yoga and mindfulness, and she enjoys her work providing this service.

#### **5.4.2 Sources of Data**

The sources of data for this case study included:

- an in-depth Skype interview with Jessica on 27 October 2014
- an overview of the website Street Yoga 2017, *Street Yoga*, accessed 15 December 2017 < <http://www.streetyoga.org> >

#### **5.4.3 In the Beginning**

For Jessica, yoga began as a fitness and wellness practice during her college years. She had a background in gymnastics; thus, the movements felt familiar and came with ease. However, when she moved cities to live in Seattle, she found herself in unfamiliar surroundings without a support network. She was feeling down and lonely, and turned to a daily practice of yoga to help deal with her feelings:

I just started practising yoga every day as a form of therapy, a space where I didn't have to—I could just be myself on my mat. It was really reflective and it was really safe and it felt right and good and healthy. On top, it made me stronger and more flexible, physically and figuratively.

From this experience, Jessica decided to take the journey to become a yoga teacher. She found that, when she was working with young people who had experienced abuse and neglect, being able to support them to find their breath and other tools could be useful. Thus, she began drawing this experiential knowledge into her work environment

What began as a physical exercise changed into a practice that was mentally and emotionally grounding and soothing. Jessica's knowledge of the way that yoga operates began to deepen over the years of practice:

If I'm feeling down, there's much more back-bending and heart opening and these poses that raise energy. If I'm anxious and scattered, there's a lot more forward folding. So I'm more aware of what's out there and tools.

Jessica does not consider yoga a way of life or a guiding philosophy, but a set of tools to employ as needed. This was a significant focus of her interview and demonstrated the way that she defines and interprets yoga.

#### **5.4.4 Working with Difficulties**

Jessica expressed that her Christian spirituality does not always align with some aspects of yoga practice. For example, she considers meditation a spiritual practice and subsequently does not participate in this form of yoga practice. For Jessica, spiritual practice is always undertaken in the community of the church. This highlights the personal ways in which yoga can be embraced, even within the context of a religion that is not historically connected to yoga practices. In this manner, Jessica referred to asana practice not as a spiritual practice, but as an emotional or psychological practice. She stated that she keeps some distance between herself and the spiritual aspects of yoga practice because of her commitment to Christianity:

My spirituality is in the Christian tradition and so there are things that I practice and things that I don't practice or that don't resonate with me as strongly as that spiritual practice. So there is some—I see overlap and I value it, but I also keep some distance between those two parts of my life.

This distance was clear in the interview, with Jessica answering the questions in a way that was congruent with her beliefs and expressions of spirituality.

#### **5.4.5 Transformations**

In terms of personal growth and change, Jessica stated that she found this very difficult to qualify. In retrospect, the word 'transformation' may have not captured the experience for her. Her responses highlighted that the emphasis placed on the way change occurs has personal meanings ascribed to it:

It [yoga] was perhaps a starting place for healing, so I think in that sense yoga and my practices and mindfulness and non-judgement were helpful. But I would say generally my rootedness in Christianity and the community of people I had in that space has always been my safe space.

This response indicates the division between Jessica's experiences of yoga as a helpful practice, and her faith in Christianity and God as transformative and healing. However, she credits yoga for:

making me stronger ... and maybe my patience is higher, I let more things go that maybe aren't that big of a deal. I think I have some tools for coming back into the moment that are more readily available to me than maybe I did before. I think, I don't know—it's a hard question.

Later in the interview, unprompted, Jessica opened up more and spoke at length about some changes that she experienced because of her yoga journey:

When I first started practising yoga, I just remember feeling amazed that I could hold Warrior Three, that I could hold it for a significant amount of time and find calm in my body and my mind ... it was so beautiful and so amazing and being so grateful for health of body, health of mind.

She reflected that Christianity does not focus on the bodily human experience of spirituality. She described the feeling of growing into her body and seeing herself as a living, breathing human as a spiritual experience and something that complemented her Christian spirituality:

Christianity offers communion ... some cultures practice prayer positions, but there's really nothing to connect this thing to your body. The thing that separates Christianity from other religions is that we believe our God became a human and put on a body and we don't even recognise our bodies as support, we actually shun the body. We don't talk about sex. For me, [yoga] was like ... it's so beautiful to be a human. I have a body.

#### **5.4.6 Translating the Personal Journey into Social Justice and Human Rights**

Jessica developed a social justice consciousness in her early life. This was something that she held well before her journey into yoga. Her parents exposed her to ways of life beyond their own. She travelled broadly and began a life of service work at the age of 16. Jessica's message of human rights is essentially about access and options. While she concedes that this is a simplification, she believes in enabling people to find and access the services they need to meet their needs and to create options and pathways. She summarised: 'Justice is about being able to choose your future'.

#### **5.4.7 Specific Tools for Human Rights and Social Justice**

Jessica advocates that individuals should develop a toolkit of resources to deal with emotional difficulties and life circumstances. In her experience, this is one of the most basic resources that people need, yet it is often missing, particularly among people who have experienced trauma. Often the young people with whom she was working would be aggressive—for example, they would regularly punch holes in the walls of their accommodation. Jessica said that these interventions were also very useful for young people who were cutting their bodies to release emotional and psychological distress. Being able to provide them with an alternative was empowering for her and her client groups:

Instead of cutting, we helped them find options, such as specific emphasis on inhaling and exhaling.

So we would do things like [saying] 'you're so mad, clench your fists. You're so mad right now. So, on your inhale, engage all your muscles in your hands, in your arms, squeeze your shoulders up to your ears, then exhale and shake it all out'. Of course [we were] recognising and affirming that they're angry because there's probably a good reason that they're angry.

Jessica identified that, based on her experiences, she believes suffering and compassion to be related:

I think experiencing suffering and pain gives you—it makes it possible for you to empathise with others who are experiencing those same pains, and I think that's where compassion comes into play. I don't just pity you, but I want to walk alongside

of you and then be able to do that because, even if it's not the exact same situation, it's a similar way of feeling or being.

Jessica was clear that firmly establishing a sense of self is critical to the work of social justice. She has chosen to work with people who, for many reasons, have not been able to develop a sense of their unique worth:

Mostly yoga offers people the opportunity to own who they are and it gives them a space to really develop their own person. I think that's why the social justice movement ... it's what is required before anything else can happen ... People can use the time on their mats to really solidify what they bring to the table, then they can speak on behalf of themselves.

Through her own experiences, Jessica identified that a breath-based yoga practice can be helpful in grounding and self-soothing, and this is a powerful experience for people to be able to begin rebuilding a shattered sense of self or living a self-directed life. She emphasised the bodily aspect of the practice as helpful to both herself and the young people with whom she works.

#### **5.4.8 Summary**

Jessica is a committed social justice worker with a clear framework for the way that she has chosen to enact her values in the world. While she works for a yoga organisation and is a yoga teacher, her spirituality is rooted in Christianity. This means that her experience of yoga is in some ways contained to an emotional or psychological inner experience. Jessica does not tend to use yoga so much for her own self-reflection in her role or in encounters, and tended not to report this as part of the way she engages yoga. However, she did make many comments about the way that she has used yoga to help her emotionally. In part, Jessica's experiences demonstrate some of the challenges of contemporary transnational yoga, and some of the different ways that yoga may be constructed according to various belief systems and faith identities.

## 5.5 Case Study 4: Jill

### 5.5.1 Brief Overview of Jill's Background

Jill is a long-term student and mindfulness teacher who blends yoga, yoga therapy, contemplative psychology and meditation. She has been teaching for 30 years and has been integral to blending yoga and meditation traditions in mainstream settings in the US. She founded the School for Compassionate Action, which was created to meet the psycho-spiritual needs of at-risk communities, and this school operates from a trauma-informed and inclusive framework. This not-for-profit organisation has a particular focus on at-risk youth.

### 5.5.2 Sources of Data

The sources of data for this case study included:

- an in-depth Skype interview with Jill on 22 November 2014
- reading Jill's book chapter, Satterfield J 2010, 'A Twisted Story', in M Stone (ed). *Freeing the body, freeing the mind, writings on the connection between yoga and buddhism* in Stone, Shambala Publications, Boston, US.
- reading website content Satterfield, J n.d., *Jill Satterfield*, [accessed 13 January 2015 <http://www.vajrayoga.com>](http://www.vajrayoga.com)
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### 5.5.3 In the Beginning

In 1979, Jill encountered a yoga class and was interested because of the movement involved. She had never previously heard of yoga, but decided to try it, and loved it. She quickly became serious about yoga and found a well-trained teacher, who mentored Jill for seven years. During this time, Jill was unwell and had chronic pain. She was seeing specialists and regularly having invasive tests. Despite the medical investigation, there was no conclusion regarding what was causing her gut pain, and it was suggested that it was psychosomatic. When medical staff suggested it could be a 'mind' issue, they had no recommendations about how to work in this area:

So I really loved her class. Then when I got out of school, I moved out of New York City about an hour north and I started looking for yoga teachers and it wasn't that



easy to find. They weren't that easy to find, but I was very fortunate I found some trained teachers in the area that I was living. So I started to practice ... It was very personal.

Jill immediately became immersed in the practices of yoga. She focused on the ability of yoga to heal her pain and unexplained illness, and this kept her motivated. Jill's early interest in yoga and healing was in response to her chronic medical conditions. After extensive medical testing and treatment, experts gave her the option to deaden the nerves in her pelvis to resolve her pain. However, this entailed the risk of paralysis or an induced coma; thus, Jill declined and decided to become more self-reliant and take on the challenge of working with the mind instead (as had been suggested was the cause of her pain). She researched the relationship between yoga and meditation, and began to extend her practice to include meditation. From this point, she also became immersed in the meditation community and began practising with the Meditation Society in Massachusetts. Moreover, she began attending silent retreats regularly throughout the year.

#### **5.5.4 Working with Difficulties**

From here, Jill turned to meditation as a last resort. During this time, Jill was practising yoga with her teacher, who spoke about yoga being able to cure diseases and pain. This notion was extremely difficult for Jill because, despite practising and practising, she was not getting any better. Her teacher did not acknowledge the limitations of yoga in healing, and Jill believed that yoga could 'cure all'. On reflection, she sees that her attitude towards the practice was misguided. She described it as both an issue with the guidance she received and with the way she interpreted the teaching. Early on, she thought that the specific postures would completely resolve her pain:

The turning point for me in the yoga practice was that yoga wasn't enough and then actually the myths that were being perpetuated by this teacher that I had. She was a very fine teacher—she knew a lot about anatomy and knew a lot about alignment, but what she knew about chronic pain or any kind of condition was very minuscule and she had quite an attitude about what yoga could do and she thought yoga could heal everything.

This attitude was problematic for Jill, and she spent years trying to perfect herself through yoga, convinced that she was not trying hard enough for the 'liberation' from

suffering to occur. She reflected that there were some deficits in the teaching she received, but also that her interpretation was clouded by the way she related to her pain.

### **5.5.5 Transformations**

With time and extensive meditation practice, Jill was sometimes attending as many as six to 10 silent retreats per year. Meditation became a method for expanding the way she related to herself. She attended a Goenka retreat and met the person who would be her teacher for the next 30 years, Mingyur Rinpoche:

I started to look into Buddhism. I read something of a quote of Buddha's, which was 'don't believe in anything that I say until you've examined it and directly experienced it for yourself'. I thought this is what I can follow. I can study with this guy. This is my guy. So that put me on the path of studying Buddhism and practising meditation in the Buddhist tradition.

Jill also provided this insight:

On these retreats, I began doing many different experimental practices. I was able to work with some of the modern meditation masters of our time from different parts of Asia. Over a period of seven years, I gradually began to work with the level of pain I was experiencing. Over the years, with some incredible guidance and much experimental practice, I slowly began to retrigger peristalsis in my gut and intestine.

The medical staff involved in Jill's care were unable to medically explain the changes that she had caused in her mind and body. There is no known way to retrigger peristalsis; however, Jill had managed to create this healing. It took her many years to discuss this experience of healing because she believes there is 'oddness' to it.

Jill refers to her transformation as becoming independent and able to take control of her life. She articulated that the practices of yoga, mindfulness and meditation gave her much resilience and resourcefulness. This was a change in her that was so powerful that she felt compelled to share it with others. In her experience, relating to the medical profession was extremely difficult. She felt as if she was dislocated and not treated as a whole human. Her experiences were not taken seriously by medical staff, nor were her intuitions about her condition. While receiving some helpful care, she also found medical staff to be condescending and she felt disenfranchised. She observed this with

fellow patients over and over again, and noticed that other patients often also seemed powerless in their quest for medical treatment, and were treated poorly by medical professionals. She also felt let down that medical professionals were generally untrained to be holistic in their treatments, did not understand the effect of physical symptoms on mental health conditions, and had little interest in mind/body connection. As a result:

I was drawn to social action ... out of my own experiences of being patronised, marginalised and misunderstood, being ignored and seeing other people that were living the same way. It just breaks my heart. It just really still breaks my heart that there are so many people that could be helped by some very simple things, some very simple practices.

Armed with this knowledge about the medical system, after being a patient for many years, and with a much greater experiential appreciation of mind/body wisdom from various Eastern perspectives, she began to combine her knowledge to provide other patients with the skills and information to be more able to navigate their medical journeys. This evolved and she began reaching out to those in lower socioeconomic areas of the community, who had little opportunity to access yoga, mindfulness or meditation because of stigma, economic resources and access barriers.

This personal transformation occurred through what Jill described as developing an inner experience of equanimity. This experience occurred through learning non-identification with her emotional self and the contents of her thoughts: ‘One day, I finally recognised that my body was in pain. My mind didn’t have to be in pain. I didn’t have to identify myself as a person in pain, or a person that was ill’. Jill stated that this was not a realisation that she attained through bypassing the pain, as is common among many people on this kind of path. Rather, she developed a capacity to move beyond habituated fear patterns. This ability to find choice in the way she related to her medical conditions provided her with some liberation from the conditions; however, as previously stated, she began to question medical authority. However, central to all of this change was learning practices of kindness and compassion. For Jill, these are the greatest practices that Jill believes are central to personal and spiritual transformation.

#### **5.5.6 Translating the Personal Journey into Social Justice and Human Rights**

Jill's personal experience was a motivational factor in her becoming an advocate and providing other people with the skills and tools to understand their own mind/body connection:

Feeling so alone in my illness, so marginalised, so misunderstood, became the seed of intention that has propelled me to help anyone I could not to have to feel the same way. I've sought out ways of bringing the Buddhist view and the postures of yoga into places where people normally wouldn't have the opportunity to practice them.

Jill was clear that there are many problematic points of connection between human rights language and modern yoga. She noted that, generally, in the US, there is a focus on yoga teachers creating celebrity followings, which at times makes their authenticity and purpose questionable. She has also noticed that there is an increasing emphasis on yoga in the area of international development. She is sometimes concerned about some of these efforts not necessarily being in the interests of others:

I don't like the yoga culture in the USA. It is seriously problematic. There is an emphasis on beautification and a confusion with the teachings. I don't fly the yoga flag. I use the term 'embodiment'. This helps separate my work from some of the other ideas of yoga.

Specifically, she believes that embodiment is the most critical part of the relationship between yoga and human rights values:

I think embodiment can help social action and human rights. Anybody that's been traumatised—which is anyone basically—especially people who have been violated ... can be helped by very gentle, very kind and very educated ways by being led by someone who knows what they're doing back into their bodies because we become disembodied when we are traumatised.

Jill credited embodiment as the starting place for the creation of compassion. She correlated the treatment of trauma as the basis for a kinder world:

Our body is like the body of the world. If we're ignoring everything that's going on below our neck, how the heck are we going to help the earth? We need to be connected to ourselves primarily ... our body, our mind, our heart ... so that we can connect to whatever resonates with us. When we are connected to our own body and our own mind, and our own heart, we connect to everything else. It just naturally

happens. It's just an automatic rippling effect ... by connecting to ourselves again, being in the body and in the present, that automatically fertilises compassion.

### **5.5.7 Specific Yoga Tools for Human Rights and Social Justice**

Jill used the word 'embodiment' to refer to the essence of the interrelationship between human rights and yoga. She emphasised the bodily experience of empowerment and the way in which individuals may come to realise human experience through their experience of the present moment. Jill's work and the way she has actioned her personal learning have occurred through establishing a not-for-profit organisation and developing social action teacher training. This training is designed based on the principles of first coming to know yourself, and then being able to share knowledge and skills in an authentic and service-driven manner:

When you're teaching in a hospital as I do, or people with trauma, chronic pain, people with all sorts of comorbid conditions—physical, emotional, you name it, the whole gambit. I was teaching in at-risk youth facilities, an addiction and rehab facility. These people aren't just going to get into downward dog ... it's just not what's working or what is accessible or even what they might care to do. So I figured out how to bring these embodiment practices to them and we do maybe some yoga therapy on a chair (what now would be considered yoga therapy on a chair).

There is so much benefit in helping or supporting someone else going into their own body. It's huge what we can do if we are actually present in our own body. If we're in our bodies, we are in the present moment.

In terms of future directions, Jill supported further community education in the area of trauma:

Everyone has some trauma of some sort. In almost any class, you will find somebody in there with trauma, whether they tell you or not. So we need to be educated. People need to be trained. There's not enough consciousness around that yet.

### **5.5.8 Summary**

Jill emphasised human rights as being able to find inner resources and to have one's needs met. She encouraged self-development as essential to being able to extend compassion to others and bring equitable distribution of services to community groups.

Jill called for more people to have access to services, such as therapeutic yoga and meditation, to support embodiment and recovery from trauma. Jill stated that, at the heart of any human endeavour in human rights and yoga, the qualities of kindness and compassion are central as the currency of a healing agenda.

## **5.6 Case Study 5: Molly**

### **5.6.1 Brief Overview of Molly's Background**

Molly Lannon Kenny is 47-year-old Caucasian woman, born and currently living in the US. Early in her life, she trained as a speech pathologist. With a long-term interest in yoga and meditation, she began teaching approximately 15 years ago, most often in medical settings. She is the founder of Samarya Yoga Centre, a not-for-profit school that operates in a low socioeconomic community in Seattle and focuses on yoga for communities that are usually not catered to in yoga schools, such as people with disabilities, larger bodies and ethnic minority backgrounds, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (usually referred to as LGBTQI) people. She is also the founder of integrated movement therapy and teaches this specific form of yoga therapy. She also developed bedside yoga for people in palliative care and for end-of-life services. Moreover, she is the Vice President of the International Association of Yoga Therapists.

### **5.6.2 Sources of Data**

The sources of data for this case study included:

- an in-depth Skype interview on 15 April 2015
- Molly's website information Lannon-Kennon, M n.d. Molly Lannon-Kenny, accessed 21 December 2013 <http://mollylannonkenny.org>

### **5.6.3 In the Beginning**

Molly was drawn to yoga as a fitness activity after school. She had an interest in gymnastics as a child, and yoga seemed like a natural progression from there. Molly connected with the practice of Ashtanga yoga and resonated with the physicality of the practice. She did not realise there was more to yoga than bodily movements; however, this changed over time. For Molly, developing a social conscience started early in her

life. Raised in a liberal, Catholic family, giving to others and to charity was a focus of her early life:

In our house, it was always that you gave to other people. You encouraged other people. You welcomed other people into your home. You had compassion for the world's poor and did the things that needed to get done in order to make the world change.

With time, Molly gradually moved away from intense asana practice towards seated meditation, and now prefers this as her main daily practice. Molly did not share much more information about the way her practice evolved; however, she answered this question clearly throughout the other questions. Molly articulated that yoga for her has changed from a physical and technical practice towards a heart-based dialogue with her community and students. Her focus changed in her teaching from being less technical and instructional (although attuned to safety) to more present and embodied. This created some challenges along the journey.

#### **5.6.4 Working with Difficulties**

Molly opened a yoga school in an area that is diverse and fluent in social justice concepts and language. She welcomed inclusivity in the yoga school; however, she learnt almost immediately that she was not really 'qualified' for the role that she was thrust into as the 'yoga teacher' in an activist community:

In terms of the whole social justice part, I definitely have gone through a whole lot of ups and downs with that. I'm a strong advocate, but then I realised there was a whole generation who uses a clear vocabulary to speak about social justice. I didn't necessarily know how to lead that movement, but, at the same time, these folks were looking to me to be the stewards for them because I do have a platform.

Molly established that she was placed in a position for which she did not necessarily feel ready because she was already considered a 'teacher' or 'leader' in the community. Thus, she sought knowledge and drew on the expertise of the community around her.

#### **5.6.5 Transformations**

Molly changed her life after connecting more intimately with yoga. She walked away from her clinical role to begin teaching yoga in the community. Molly described that,

earlier in her life, she was overcome with feelings of low self-worth and as though she 'was an imposter and didn't even have the credentials to be a teacher'. She grew into the role of teacher. Molly believes that this role is not about pushing her agenda onto other people, but about guiding them towards an authentic experience:

I have no personal investment in what they do or what they don't do and how they take it and where they go with their practice. I get to completely let go of feeling like that's my job or my interest in anyway.

At the centre of her work, Molly concentrates on unconditional and radical acceptance of self and other. She stated that this is the direction in which all her work is headed, and she seeks to provide this to her students and community. However, she stated that this goal is often considered problematic in the yoga community:

I'm an advisor to this group called the Yoga Service Council ... I went to their conference last year and during a discussion ... about people in larger bodies ... I got into all sorts of problems when I suggested that people don't need to lose weight and there's nothing wrong with them. If they do want to lose weight, it's not my job to be their weight loss coach. My job is to, would be to, see that people are just perfect exactly as they are. If they want to lose weight, then I can be supportive of that.

For Molly, teaching yoga is not about focussing on rigid alignment or sequences of postures. It is about trying to bring awareness and kindness to her teaching, and, if students see something of interest to them, they can take that away with them. Molly has found this shift in thinking to be profound. Before this, she indicated a sense of needing to 'tell' students what she was giving and proving to them. Thus, she feels she has taken the emphasis away from needing to 'teach' and now seeks to just be and embody. The process is more organic and is how she was taught by her own teachers, who most recently included Ram Dass. Molly believes that this change derived from being able to trust herself in the process of teaching, and not have any agenda for the way her students interpret the teaching she is offering:

To me, the only thing that heals is love. We're as afraid of talking about love as we are talking about God. It's like taboo somehow. But I think if we could move beyond that and say that's what we are talking about, we're talking about love. That's the thing that's going to change things and that's what's going to heal things. So how can we be better at being that? That's where my whole journey is moving towards now.



### **5.6.6 Translating the Personal Journey into Social Justice and Human Rights**

In Molly's interview, she highlighted that her early interest in social justice as a way of life has emerged in her teaching and approach. She did not overtly decide to offer a different yoga centre or employ an anti-oppressive approach. It was only in retrospect that she realised she had done this (and that she had performed the theory of anti-oppressive practice in relation to yoga) without knowing the theoretical background. For her, this practice felt right. She began her school in a low socioeconomic area with a mixed-ethnicity community, and her students were socially aware and demanded this awareness from her as well. At times, she has been reluctant to assume the role of leader because she felt ill equipped. However, despite not feeling equipped, she quickly developed strength to teach what she thought was needed, despite what some students may have thought about her messages:

My Thanksgiving Day class yesterday was talking about how our spiritual life is absolutely not separate from our political life, cultural and social life. Some people, that's not the message they want to be hearing at their yoga studio. They want to go do their yoga and do whatever else they do. The message is very overt.

Molly described the Samarya Centre as a community and devotional space. The centre has a sense of community ownership, and Molly used the term 'we' to describe the centre. While she is the lead teacher and founder, there is significant community engagement. She described the centre as decorated with pictures of spiritual leaders of all ages, nationalities and generations because people resonate with different teachers and it is important to their community to acknowledge this:

There are real altars and iconography; although it's diverse iconography. There's [a picture of] everyone from Bob Marley, John Lennon, Malala, Mother Theresa ... whichever of these work for you, just connect with that ... You can connect with whoever you want to connect with—essentially as the intermediary to what you're all sharing, which is some kind of God consciousness or divinity or whatever you want to call it.

Molly recounted an experience of speaking at a conference in 2015. Her conference paper and presentation addressed some of the practical ways she worked in a yoga environment with women who were recovering from sexual abuse. During this conference, she stated that, in her experience, it was not necessary to avoid touching or

assisting people in class who had been sexually abused (to avoid triggering traumatic memories). She received negative feedback because her experience was contrary to some of the emerging research on this topic. Molly returned to the class environment and explained the situation to her students, and again asked them what they would like. They stated that they actually wanted physical contact in class. Molly gave her students the choice and enabled them to speak for themselves. Her approach demonstrates openness to constructive criticism and an ability to work in difficult environments.

Molly does not see any difference between yoga and social justice work. She views yoga as a practice that can bring vitality and awareness to individuals, which she argues underscores the work of social justice. Molly teaches that the change that we want to be is within us and within the sphere of the community around us. By way of example, she spoke about a story that had headlined in the US, involving a white police officer killing an African American teenager and not being indicted for the crime. Molly stated that there was so much outrage in the community about this incident, yet not necessarily any action. She encouraged her students to look to themselves to see where they might perpetuate oppressive and abusive behaviour, and encouraged them to take action:

You're saying these things matter to you and you're coming to your yoga practice, you're doing your meditation. But here you are with an actual opportunity to offer kinship to another human being and you don't offer it. So that to me is the whole question of social justice and yoga. How do I use my yoga to make an actual change in the way that I treat other people?

At the Samarya Centre in Seattle, their teacher training is bound to this underpinning idea: 'If you've come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound with mine, then let us work together'. This view positions social justice as a mutual exchange. However, Molly also stated that spirituality is central to the dialogue of yoga and social justice:

I just get older and I see more hardship in the world and tragedy and abuse and trauma. It's just over and over; my belief is that you have got to get to God. Whatever that is, however you claim that. It's the only enduring thing that's going to give us solace.

Molly emphasised God as a central connection between yoga and human rights. This is part of her value and belief system. She did not reflect that this could also be problematic in certain settings.

### **5.6.7 Summary**

Molly is dedicated and has intuitively worked through the process of developing a thriving community centre based on the principles of anti-oppressive practice, diversity and equality. She demonstrates social justice concepts through the practice of her leadership and the way the centre was formed. Molly attempts to live the Samarya philosophy, which is to provide access to the state of yoga to all people. She also raised the issue of becoming a social justice leader based on her yoga teaching status.

## **5.7 Case Study 6: Narayan**

### **5.7.1 Brief Overview of Narayan's Background**

Narayan was born in North India and relocated to Australia approximately 15 years ago. He spent his early years working in community organisations as a community development worker. Narayan has devoted much of his life to social justice issues, particularly poverty, community development, mental health, refugee health and human rights. He completed a doctoral degree that investigated yoga as a complementary approach to refugee-related trauma treatment. He is currently a lecturer at James Cook University in the Social Work Department, and teaches community development subjects from a transformational perspective. Narayan discovered yoga 26 years ago in New Delhi, and has had a self practice of yoga since this time. He is not a teacher of postural yoga; however, he teaches yogic concepts through his roles in the community and at university.

### **5.7.2 Sources of Data**

The sources of data for this case study included:

- an in-depth telephone interview on 24 November 2013
- Narayan's PhD thesis, Gopalkrishnan, N 2012, *Refugee Rights and Yoga Therapy as Complementary Integrated Medicine*, doctoral thesis, Curtin University, Perth.

### **5.7.3 In the Beginning**

At a time when Narayan was in a fairly unhappy phase of his life, he drove past a place in New Delhi that offered yoga classes. He joined the 200 people who attended each morning, and spent six weeks at this training centre, before being invited to explore yoga teaching through formal training. He stated that his decision to explore the practice of yoga directly related to him feeling unfulfilled and unsettled. However, underlying this feeling, he described that he was also suffering a level of trauma. He reported that this trauma was attributable to early experiences of child abuse, including domestic violence and physical and emotional abuse. He also had many trauma symptoms, including anxiety, ‘living in a fog’ and difficulty relating to others.

### **5.7.4 Working with Difficulties**

Narayan strongly asserted that breath-based formal practices, including asana and meditation, are not what he considers the full extent yoga. He describes yoga as the way that one lives and, most broadly, a philosophy that began in the Indian subcontinent. He views breath-based practices, including asana, as part of this overall philosophy.

In terms of traditional yoga, Narayan found very little support for the treatment of the trauma symptoms he was experiencing. He asserts that yoga in a traditional sense has a prerequisite for a certain level of health and wellbeing. The lack of information about trauma was problematic for him because there was no guidance from teachers about how to adapt practice. This caused additional stress to an already extremely stressed mind/body system. He had to learn to hold himself less accountable to formal practice. His attitude in earlier days was much more rigorous, and, if he missed days of practice, he would berate himself and cause himself additional suffering. With time, he came to see that this was an unhelpful way of dealing with his trauma, and has now learnt a more compassionate approach to his practice. He applies this approach by only completing what is possible on a given day, and using the practice as a support:

I would say one of the most critical problems with yoga has always been the fact that it was always designed for healthy people, not for people with either mental or physical health issues. So the concept of yoga therapy is a very new thing—it’s not what yoga was traditionally practised for. Yoga was traditionally a spiritual practice and there was this expectation that you would be of a reasonable level of fitness.

Another difficulty that Narayan has encountered on his yoga journey has been the commodification of yoga and the overreliance on asana as a tool for teaching, particularly in the West:

I'd never once injured myself ... However, after moving to Australia, with the emphasis on the physical achievement, the flexibility, the images you're constantly exposed to, the conversations that you're hit with—the first thing I did was injure my back in yoga practice. I don't buy yoga magazines. As a man who is getting older, because now I'm in my fifties, it actually holds me back because I see all these young people doing all these things and there's a constant thing of youth and flexibility and all these kinds of things. I stay away from all of that.

Narayan considers this problematic for yoga, and it is an issue that creates difficulties in finding a community with which he can connect spiritually, particularly in Australia. He stated this as a difficulty in the yoga community at the moment: 'Many people are leaving yoga because of these issues. I still practice, but it becomes problematic when it is seen as a goal in itself'.

### **5.7.5 Transformations**

Over time, Narayan has found that his practice has become a more subtle and intimate experience, and he attributes this to his continual commitment to yoga over many years. He has noticed that he now experiences his life's positive and negative periods as all part of the human experience that should be embraced, not avoided:

That's the kind of thing I've come to realise over my life that whenever I'm in trouble, one sort of goes through these kinds of ups and downs in life, in your spiritual self and your own mental self, and the thing is that [yoga] is always there, so it gives you that support at the time you need it.

After coming into close contact with his trauma in yoga practice, Narayan has learnt that kindness and compassion are the keys to transformation. However, this may be particularly challenging to learn for people with trauma histories:

It is very important that you give yourself time ... be gentle with your body and your mind and if you don't feel like doing it, don't do it, it's perfectly okay, and when you feel like doing it—you will come back to it. The stress of guilt and the stress of these

kinds of things, they're much worse. So I think it's really important, that sense of compassion has to be towards yourself, your body and your mind.

Narayan credits yoga as the way he learnt compassion for himself. He stated that he has built his life around the principles of yoga, with the formal practice as part of this life. This has affected the jobs he has chosen, the areas in which he has worked and the life partner he chose, which has subsequently helped him create lasting peace in his life. Narayan emphasised that, through his lifelong yoga journey, he has been able to change the way he relates to pain and suffering. This has been one of the gifts that yoga has given to him. He stated:

Actually the concept of pain and suffering to me now has changed completely. I don't see pain and suffering anymore. Over the years, I've come to realise that it's the most wonderful learning that I have is in [those] periods of time. These are the times that we change.

Narayan highlighted the way that self-awareness can be transformative, especially through difficulty. He discussed the conundrum that, while it may be our tendency to avoid pain and suffering, actually working towards them is the way to begin to learn to navigate these more intense times. Narayan also stated that, in his experience, it is not only our own pain that can be transformative, but also sharing someone else's pain. He discussed caring for his wife while she lived with cancer, which lasted five years. This period of suffering was a transformative time. His experience of supporting his wife required them both to cultivate new levels of care and compassion. Finally, Narayan stated that yoga has permeated his life in every way, and he has subsequently grown: 'In every aspect, spiritually, physically, mentally, economically, socially—all of these things have been the transformation'.

#### **5.7.6 Translating the Personal Journey into Social Justice and Human Rights**

Narayan was drawn to social justice issues early in his life. His older brother was born with significant intellectual impairments, and this was extremely challenging for his rural Indian family. Despite the social norms of the culture and time in history, his mother went to complete training to support children with disabilities. From here, she established a local school to support children like her son and others in the area. Narayan was also very interested in reading as a child, and encountered different

concepts from a variety of books. He was drawn to the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, which he has revisited numerous times in his life.

Despite these seeds being planted early in his life, Narayan established a career in marketing and business. However, he had no real ambitions in the commercial area of this field. On weekends, he began to volunteer to support local artisans to be able to sell their wares for decent prices. This work gave him joy to use his skills for something with which he felt connected. From here, he began working with not-for-profit organisations. During this time, Narayan continued his yoga practice. This helped him in the early days, of his career, because he was experiencing a steep learning curve and needed to learn patience to work in community settings, to develop compassion and to navigate the difficulties of working in the community setting.

Narayan is now a lecturer in community development subjects at James Cook University in Australia. In his teaching, he draws directly on the experience of his own growth. He positions his teaching from a perspective of potential transformation. His PhD research combines inspiration from his own life (healing trauma with the support of yoga) and another area of passion—refugee rights. With the spirit of transformation at the heart of his work, he teaches with the hope that others can find more compassion in their lives and execute this in community settings in a skilful manner:

So when I teach community work or mental health [subjects], for example, it's not about the assessment, it's not about the healing, but it's about how our own attitude changes when we go through the semester and we come to understand these areas and this practice—how do we change as human beings.

Narayan views this emphasis on change, transformation and growth in an educational setting as fundamentally linked to the teachings of yoga as a transformative practice.

Overall, Narayan views a practical and philosophical connection in the way yoga and human rights are linked. He is in the process of establishing a community development project for university students to eventually lead. He stated that this project will be simultaneously based on self-awareness and transformation of the student, as well as possible access and transformation for the participants or client group. Narayan does not teach postural yoga to his students; however, he incorporates the values of yoga and

other self-reflective opportunities to encourage students to be aware of their own limitations and strengths.

In terms of the relationship between compassion and suffering, Narayan cautioned about the way this is interpreted, particularly as it relates to work in the caring fields. In the field of social work, Narayan stated he continually sees people take the notion of compassion too far, and are too giving and this significantly affects their functioning:

Compassion in the context of suffering sometimes can lead people up the wrong path where they actually start, especially when it's totally focused outwards, ... [to] take things too far. The balance of compassion between yourself and other is one of the primary things in that. [Compassion] is more a sense of understanding, a sense of giving people space, giving you space, rather than pity or something like that. I don't think there is a human being who hasn't suffered.

#### **5.7.7 Summary**

Narayan demonstrates a deeply imbedded overlap between the practices of yoga and his human rights work. This overlap has occurred on multiple levels over many years. To begin with, Narayan drew on yoga to help him heal trauma sustained early in his life. He described healing through yoga as a journey of coming to understand himself from a perspective of compassion. Narayan has been one of the few Australian researchers pioneering the area of yoga as an adjunct treatment for trauma recovery.

He navigated difficulty in his life and was able to begin with more meaningful. This proved to be an alignment in his values and the way he contributed to the world around him. Yoga became a self-care practice to support him through the difficult terrain of community work. Eventually, yoga became central to the way he lived his life, and he described his life beginning to assume an intimate and subtle nature. Yoga provided Narayan with a sound basis for personal values, which he extended into his relationships, workplace and teaching.

When Narayan speaks about social justice and human rights, he does so in terms of transformation, underlined by his own experiences. This also emphasises the variety of ways that change can occur. Narayan highlighted the issues of commodification of yoga and the effect this has had on his relationship with yoga. He sees a distortion and an emphasis on achievement, which can negatively affect the transformational aspect of



yoga. He also highlighted that general yoga taught in mainstream settings does not have a trauma focus, which can make it difficult for people with trauma to adapt the teachings to their specific circumstances.

## **5.8 Case Study 7: Seane**

### **5.8.1 Brief Overview of Seane's Background**

Seane was born and raised in New Jersey in the US. She describes herself as having a Jewish heritage and being white and middle class. Seane is the founder of the not-for-profit organisation, Off the Mat Into the World, which has smaller chapters across cities in the US, New Zealand and Australia. She regularly travels and teaches vinyasa (asana) and social justice concepts, and encourages communities to self-organise social activism. During the Occupy Wall Street movement, she was involved in leading large-scale demonstrations involving yoga practices and public speaking. She began yoga in the late 1980s and became a teacher in 1995. Seane has trained as a yoga teacher and completed training in relation to trauma.

### **5.8.2 Sources of Data**

The sources of data for this case study included:

- in-depth telephone interview with Seane on 14 June 2013
- reading website information – Corn, S 2012, *Seane Corn* available at <http://www.seanecorn.com> accessed 7 October 2015. Off the Mat Into the World 2007, Off the mat into the world available at <http://offthematintotheworld>, accessed 21 June 2016.
- participating in a three-day yoga immersion course with Seane in Perth, Australia, in February 2014.

### **5.8.3 In the Beginning**

Seane does not recall specifically if there was any particular reason she started yoga. Her initial involvement in yoga partly arose because of where she was living and the community with which she was socialising. In the 1980s, she was a waitress in the Life Café. This café was owned by David Life, who went on to open the Jivamukti Yoga Centre—one of the most well-known yoga schools in New York City today. At that

time in her life, she was surrounded by people who enjoyed yoga, and there were opportunities for yoga all around her. She described the Lower East Side of New York and her community as being either interested in drugs or yoga—and she chose yoga.

At first, yoga was a fun activity that Seane practised. She did not associate it with spirituality, although she was aware of it being a spiritual practice. Yoga decreased her levels of stress and there was an element of ‘cool’ associated with it, and she enjoyed the healthy feeling she experienced after a class. Her emphasis was on a physical experience. After a few years of this practice, her view began to change and she became aware of the practice as enabling her to access emotional and energetic experiences. This occurred in a way that she still remembers almost 25 years later:

I remember for one day I was miserable for whatever reason. I was in kind of a transition time in my life. I just woke up in the morning ... and I decided to take a yoga class. Throughout the whole class, I just couldn't get it out of my head, you know, just spinning on whatever was going on in my life at that time. After class was over, I was walking home and I remember a very specific moment where I stopped short in the middle of the street and thought: oh, what do I feel? There was something different and I felt different. I couldn't identify it. I realised I was happy, on a deep, cellular level.

Following this experience, Seane noticed that, when she returned to class, she heard a different meaning in the same words that the teacher used. Seane described her understanding of herself as including an experiential understanding of the mind/body connection. She found that she was suffering from tension and stress, and it took a five-year period of yoga practice to begin to resolve the tension she held in the mind/body. After this five-year period, she was more able to access more subtle self-knowledge.

#### **5.8.4 Working with Difficulties**

Seane divides her practice experiences into three realms. Her first experiences were of the physical body or physical realm, while her second experiences encompassed the emotional and energetic realms. Finally, she now describes herself as being in the psychic and symbolic realm of her practice. For five years, she undertook physical practice, and then 10 years were devoted to shifting emotional and energetic patterns in the mind/body system. She stated that this period was very difficult for her. She was

filled with feelings of grief, anger, shame and guilt. During this time of her practice, she confronted the effect of early childhood sexual abuse on her emotional and psychological self. She spoke about this being difficult to live through. As a coping mechanism, she developed obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). She stated that the rituals she developed were a way to maintain control and allow her to create a feeling of safety.

To deal with the overwhelming effect of early childhood sexual abuse, Seane used a variety of psychological therapies to restore her sense of self and safety. The practice of yoga helped her in this healing:

It really became about sitting with the sensation and letting the energy of that sensation discharge. That's what yoga can do. Literally. You move that energy. You just sit with it, breathe into it. At first it would happen like with the OCD. Panic comes; the anxiety comes up because you feel like you're going to die. You feel like you're out of control. But in the practice of yoga, everything changes ... you just sit, breathe and wait.

#### **5.8.5 Transformations**

Seane discussed her life as an unfolding experience with which she has been able to intimately connect. Beginning as a fun practice of physical movement, she now describes yoga practice as the reflection of an embodied prayer. The changes and evolution in herself have been significant. The transformation has returned parts of her personality that she lost in her childhood, as she became more mistrustful and hurt. The changes included becoming kinder, more patient and more honest, as well as feeling more dynamic and energised. However, Seane stated that the most significant change was in relation to spirit. She calls this 'God', and stated that she was agnostic in her early life, an atheist in her twenties, and now feels deeply committed to God and the spiritual path.

In terms of spirituality, yoga has given Seane the ability to accept and join people wherever they are on their personal journey, and not make the assumption that they should be in another place. She has developed trust in the individual's path, and she calls this divine. The actual breath-based practices of yoga, including asana, provide Seane with the ability to self-regulate, and move away from her reactive patterns of

anger and withdrawal. She describes that this has given her the space to be able to ‘take a breath ... feel my feet on the floor ... become embodied and present ... and make a choice from a more grounded place’.

At the heart of her spirituality is the belief that we are all connected. Acknowledging this connection means that Seane must support change. This is a particular area to which Seane is drawn, which focuses on drawing awareness to oppression and inequality. The emphasis on connectedness means she is interested in both her own and others’ consciousness:

If you believe in the tenets of yoga—that we’re all connected—the way I do, then it is an insult to spirit kind ... not to want to shift what’s happening and be of support to change ... it’s impossible for me to stand back and accept it as it is and not want to engage.

#### **5.8.6 Translating the Personal Journey into Social Justice and Human Rights**

Seane explained that the way she acts in terms of social justice has been completely altered because of the lessons she has learnt from her spiritual life. One of the most prominent lessons has been to ‘ignore the story, see the soul and to remember to love’. When discussing the ‘story’, she explained that she had a difficult time when engaging in community activism with certain people—specifically, pimps, anti-abortion advocates, people who were dogmatic and fundamentalist, and people who were abusive, particularly to children. She stated that her hatred for these types of people made it difficult to work in this environment:

It made it impossible for me to engage in these environments in an open-hearted way. I recognised I was the problem. I couldn’t be in these conversations because I came to the table already with so much anguish and anger. I had to learn and ignore the story and see the soul. If I’m only focused on their shadow, then they’re my teacher. They’re reflecting back to me all the places where I’m still disconnected, where I don’t believe that we are all connected.

Seane did not imply that the individuals’ behaviours were acceptable or just; however, she explained that, despite their abusive actions, she believed that their humanity was intact. This meant that she has needed to become more skilled with language and being

able to draw on compassion, her belief in God and persevering through difficulties, no matter what the outcome.

The belief in God is that everything happens the way it's supposed to for an individual soul to transform. That doesn't mean I turn my back on conflict. Quite the opposite. It becomes my dharma, my work, to step into the presence of someone else's karma, with no attachment to the end result.

Seane stated that activists—particularly those working in the area of trauma—need to emphasise self-care, such as yoga and reflective practices. She emphasised the heaviness of this work and that there should be recognition of the dynamic between the activist and community or individual. In her experience, she has found that activists are generally working with their own trauma, which needs to be addressed or it will affect the community or individual with whom they are working:

Really reflecting (at the end of the day) where they were reactive—where did they shut down, where they really show up and why, what did it remind them of?—and to make it part of their enquiry. What personality were they drawn to? What kind of person did they reject? Who was that person to them? How does working in a situation with a power dynamic make you feel empowered, needed and indispensable? Name it without shame. Name it, name it, name it.

Seane referred to this as 'shadow work' and believes it is a critical part of work as a yoga teacher and activist. She advocates considering how each interaction—regardless of one's role or power—is an opportunity for self-reflection and transformation. She rejects that her service is 'selfless'. She works in this field because it enables her to deepen her spiritual awakening. Of course, she hopes she can also offer value for the people with whom she works. However, she believes that the exchange is often considered one-sided. Seane views human rights work to be part of the spiritual path, not devoid of it. In regard to tackling the tumultuous terrain of walking this path of awakening, she stated:

You called this in. You have no one to blame but yourself because your consciousness says: bring it on. I want to transcend it. You can't transcend it without experience. So you're just being initiated. So try and find a sense of humour and just know that you can keep running all you want. It won't matter. You will always end up in this realm because you set an intention a long time ago.

As an example of this, she discussed that, during her recent work in Cambodia, she witnessed a man attempt to commit suicide. This was a shocking event for her and she saw significant amounts of his blood, and was present while he was receiving first aid. When she went home for the evening, she was overwrought, and, in her own words, ‘picked a fight’ with her partner at home. On reflection, she did not deal with the traumatic event, and instead attempted to channel the energy into someone or something else.

To maintain emotional and psychological balance and be able to process the difficult events that occur throughout her day, she implements six practices that she views as non-negotiable: yoga, meditation, prayer, an appropriate diet, therapy and sleep. If any of these are not present in Seane’s life, she believes she will begin to fall into old patterns of coping that are not sustainable or healthy.

### **5.8.7 Summary**

Seane believes that the most important factor that can be translated from yoga into the area of human rights is the understanding of inter-being. She stated that this is the first teaching of yoga and the first teaching of human rights. The problems that human rights seek to overcome are largely perpetuated on the basis of ‘otherness’ or ‘separateness’. Seane believes that this sense of separation is the basis of all oppression, power dynamics, war, violence, rape and illiteracy. Thus, she believes the focus of human rights work is to heal this limited perspective.

She pointed out that, as tempting as it is to focus outwards, individuals must also be dedicated to look inwards to the areas where each of us perpetuate our own hurts and traumas as a part of collective suffering. She highlighted that it can be seductive for social justice advocates and yoga teachers to fall into a false sense of ‘helping’ that constructs the relationship as one-sided. Her teaching reminds students that this relationship involves mutual enrichment, and that this should be acknowledged.

## **5.9 Case Study 8: Andi**

### **5.9.1 Brief Overview of Andi’s Background**

Andi describes herself as a white, queer, cisgender, disabled woman in her thirties. She lives in Canada on the traditional and ancestral territories of the Squamish, Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh people. She has been involved in activism for many years. She described her politics as being influenced by queer, anti-racist, anti-colonial and feminist thinking. Andi views yoga and mindfulness as a revolutionary process of awakening. Over the past 10 years, she has been involved with the yoga community as a student, teacher and activist. She mainly teaches in community centres, with a focus on engaging politics through the grassroots work of her yoga teaching, and she regularly publishes articles in the area of yoga and social justice.

### **5.9.2 Sources of Data**

The sources of data for this case study included:

- an in-depth interview with Andi on 15 July 2014
- reading website information Moonlit Moth n.d., *Moonlit Moth*, viewed 22 June 2013 < <http://www.moonlitmoth.com> >

### **5.9.3 In the Beginning**

Necessity initially drew Andi towards yoga. Andi was the victim of an aggressive sexual assault, and subsequently experienced anxiety, panic attacks and insomnia. Her mother had heard that yoga could be useful to reduce the effect of stress, and suggested that Andi try it. Andi remembers her first class well because she absolutely hated it. She reported feeling awkward and stupid. However, after the class, she felt comfortable in her body and fell into a deep sleep. After weeks of insomnia, this dramatic change in her ability to fall asleep caused Andi to decide to return.

This led Andi into a stop–start relationship with yoga for a while. She would stop going to yoga for a while, and then burn out from her activism activities. She realised that she needed something to sustain her, and yoga became this activity. She became more involved with the yoga community and the practices of yoga, and began undertaking training to eventually become a yoga teacher herself.

Andi's relationship with yoga waxed and waned over the years. Initially, she identified a symbiosis between her feminist ethics and yoga teaching. She found it was helpful to

work with women and encourage them to find ways to explore their sense of self through the mind, body and spirit connection. In terms of her own practice, she began to get in touch with her emotions and spirituality through yoga. Andi did not speak of yoga as a continual practice, but as something to which she returns time and time again.

#### **5.9.4 Working with Difficulties**

Andi reported that racism, colonisation and violence are deeply moving areas of engagement in her life. Lifting the veil on the pretence of racial equality through community organising and education, as well as deeply acknowledging the trauma associated with the colonisation process of the country in which she lives, has been part of her purpose. When she connected with the way the brutality of colonisation was sidestepped in most mainstream thinking, including academia, she instantly recognised that challenging this denial was part of her life work.

Therefore, reconciling the concept of being a yoga teacher in a contemporary Western country became part of an ethical question for Andi. Her most poignant difficulty was in reference to the lack of critical race awareness within the yoga community. As she began to draw issues of race, culture and colonisation into conversations within the yoga community, she was met with intense resistance. She wished to talk openly about issues of cultural appropriation and was interested in understanding why more South Asian teachers were not involved in the yoga community, despite her community having a large South Asian population. She found that the yoga community became very uneasy with these discussions and her opinions. This included sustained social media attacks of a personal nature in opposition to asking questions of the yoga community about critical race and modern yoga.

Ultimately, Andi decided to relinquish her role as a teacher because she felt, for the above reasons and others, that she could not work in this area and retain her values:

I don't really want to take up space in a way that claims that I have some kind of authority. I know that there are lots of teachers [who can] and I respect that opinion. It's just not mine. It's not like teaching isn't about being an authority figure. It is. I just couldn't pretend that I could be that.

From this point, Andi began to explore other spiritual practices and left yoga teaching. She reconciled her inability to teach yoga with being true to her values. Through the



practices of yoga, she became open to other forms of secular spirituality and is now more interested in pagan spirituality and rituals. She feels that this is much more aligned with her cultural roots, and enables her to explore something that appears authentic. It was unclear from her interview whether Andi considered any other spiritual practices from the same critical race perspective.

#### **5.9.5 Transformations**

Andi spent many years intensively practising yoga. She credits this practice with a whole range of changes that she experienced. Andi stated that she dabbled with atheism; however, this did not feel right to her. Thus, as she underwent yoga teacher training, she decided to suspend 'belief'. As a result, she had some experiences that she called 'profound spiritual experiences' when walking through a forest after class:

Yoga was the door to all sorts of experiences and dabbling with herbalism, witchcraft and paganism. It completely changed me from this person who was very intellectual, very academic, very politically rigorous to someone who was very *whoo*. [meaning unusual spiritual beliefs].

Andi observed that spirituality was driven out of her because of her surrounding community and the political environment in which she lived. Upon reconnecting with her spirit (with yoga integral to this), she moved from the city to the country, and the way she lived began to radically change. She has since become much more connected to the earth and the seasons and the way she reacts to them:

Fundamentally, my yoga practice really, really changed my relationship to my body. It changed my relationship to my thoughts, which as a person with an invisible disability [having severe anxiety disorders from an early age] ... completely changed my perspective.

Andi credits yin yoga with enabling her to cope and remain with feelings of discomfort and pain. This in turn creates the space to be able to respond to situations skilfully, rather than merely reacting. Yoga has enabled Andi to create a deeper relationship with parts of her experience, including reclaiming her body after sexual assault.

#### **5.9.6 Translating the Personal Journey into Social Justice and Human Rights**

Andi believes that her anxiety made her more empathetic towards others, which meant she felt the need to be involved in the social justice movement. She was sensitised to other people's pain and wished to do something to create a world that was fairer. For Andi, this was a spiritual pull to align her values and purpose in the world. She stated that she loves social justice inspired work, yet is regularly exhausted and overwhelmed. When she was 18, she became involved in the climate change movement, and trained with Greenpeace. She really connected with the people there, who seemed to care about a larger expression of their humanity:

I think our society is organised in such a way with these really, really large stuffed-up systems. We look at these systems and they really do cast a veil over our eyes ... that's what privilege is, right? It operates to make us not be able to see the flaws in these systems and in the way that they're hurting and impacting people.

For some years, Andi described her activism as mainly yoga teaching. Through this, she believed she was able to support people to become more aware of the way they could listen to their bodies. She summarised this as a conversation between herself and others:

If I could summarise, it has impacted my activism through self-care, through increased awareness of my body and its limits, and my feelings and my needs, and how to articulate those things. It's also impacted the way that I teach and facilitate. Mostly, it's drawn me straight into a really, really deep reckoning with race and my entitlement as a white person ... It's been potent and very confusing and very painful for me in lots of moments.

There are rigorous expectations of living in a colonial and capitalist world, and society carries extremely heavy burdens—very violent burdens. Yoga is a practice, which is a life raft through our trauma and a life raft through pain and discomfort. People are really resistant to losing it [the pain], myself included.

Andi stated that she has some uncertainty regarding the experience of 'sitting with pain'. She noticed that her relationship to suffering began to change, and she found herself becoming apathetic towards the experiences of others, and was uncomfortable with this reaction:

I think it's okay to have that balance of sometimes you need to be able to just acknowledge, okay ... I can't do anything about that right now. I'm just going to move on with my life and I'm not going to let it overwhelm me ... But we live in a

world that is really violent. It is really awful and we should be angry with that. It's not a logical response to look at the way the world is and think, okay, I'm just going to say 'Om' a bunch of times and everything's going to be okay ... The people that I really admire, they don't use their practice to turn away from pain and suffering. They use it to understand it more deeply, and I respect that.

Andi considers suffering essential for both empathy and compassion. She also described the experience of suffering as humbling. Andi has noticed in the activist community a tendency for people to wish to exist in anger or sadness all the time. She believes that a fundamental understanding of the interrelationship between compassion and suffering is part of the journey for human rights activists. Andi was disparaging of some of the recent efforts in the yoga community to begin working in the fields of community and international development. She observed that some of the efforts were based on the colonialist process, and that the community had started to engage with only very basic knowledge in the area.

By experiencing burnout many times and becoming too involved in working situations where she paid no attention to her own needs, she found that she treated herself in the same way that she accused capitalist markets of treating people. This enabled Andi to begin to understand that social justice was not only an intellectual concept to be debated, but was ultimately an experience that should be felt within the body.

Andi found that uniting yoga and human rights was sometimes a neat fit, yet sometimes more difficult to reconcile. Andi does not believe that these movements are beyond reconciliation; however, she stated that, at the moment, she does not know how to achieve this, and does not have the energy to invest to find a form of yoga in which she can feel authentic. Becoming embodied and able to identify her own experiences, feelings and emotions were the main ways in which Andi identified congruence in the relationship between self and other.

### **5.9.7 Summary**

Andi was clear that there is great detail and nuance required to determine the overlap between yoga and social justice. She articulated some of the difficulties that she has encountered from her grassroots approach in applying learning from both of these areas in one form of teaching. Although this has meant walking away from yoga teaching and

any identification as a 'yogi', it is clear that she has reached this point through a considered personal journey. Andi's interview highlighted her own experiences of trauma and sensitivity to trauma around her. She used the practice of yin yoga to deal with the effects of trauma, such as panic attacks and insomnia.

Andi's main points regarding the convergence of yoga and human rights were through the model of self-care and exploration of her body and breath. She has implemented these activities both to work with the symptoms of trauma and to provide a sustainable basis for activism. Embarking on a journey into yoga was part of a journey into spirituality, self-awareness and ultimately developing a sense of wholeness.

Andi does not feel that her values and politics are congruent with the way she was taught yoga in North America. She was aware that there were teachers who she respected, yet was unable to access their teaching from her location. She no longer defines her spirituality through yoga; however, she has found alternatives that feel more authentic. Andi has also made changes in terms of her activism and is now more focused on writing and narrative as a way of exploring the political realm of activism. This is more aligned with the way she wants to live, as well as with her skills and self-care.

### **5.10 Auto-ethnographic Case Study**

I was drawn to a language of justice as early as I can remember. I can't say exactly what this was from. There are so many variables to the story. I know that as a child, Christianity influenced my beliefs, particularly about social justice. Giving to others, was the most central teaching of my early years. I loved reading the brochures from TEAR Australian, World Vision and other charities that I was exposed to at church. I loved the idea of unconditional love and I spent time staring at the pictures of Jesus and noted the kindness and compassion that he was sketched with. While I didn't think much of church services, I distinctly remember the feeling of renewal that would wash over me as I left the church buildings on many Sundays. I noticed the greenness in the leaves, the quality of the air. There was a difference that was palatable.

I was the kind of young person who was into every kind of social justice activity in my school and community. I craved understanding the way that the world 'worked'. I joined Amnesty International, the United Nations Youth Program and was part of other

groups in my community. I spoke out about injustice and this caused confrontation, confusion and retribution within my family and community. I could always see that so many people lived in denial about the supposed fairness of Australian society. As a young person living in a small country town in Queensland, I acutely saw the issues that faced Aboriginal Australians, women and those outside of the capital cities. I did more than see them in fact; I experienced first hand, the difficulties of living within a family struggling with the difficulties of complex trauma, mental ill health and disability stigma and intergenerational abuse. However as well as these challenges I also experienced considerable privilege, with parents who were professionals and in general our family was held high regard in our local community. By keeping some of the difficulties hidden, as many people do who experience intense trauma, mental ill health and disability, I became adept at having a public 'face' as a kind of coping mechanism.

My interest in yoga and spirituality began in my early teenage years. I came across mindfulness through some resources that my father had been given and became fascinated by the practices. I would play a relaxation tape over and over again and loved the feelings that it seemed to produce in me. By the time I went to university to study social work, I had found a yoga teacher and was learning yoga as a practice of postures. I loved it. From here I moved around and would find yoga teachers wherever I went. It was part of my life, but other than needing it in my life, I didn't give it much more thought than that.

Meanwhile I was busy forging an understanding of issues such as women's and children's rights, mental health and community development. I worked in many locations across the Australia and around the world. I was focussed on the need for better services to address the issues of child abuse and mental health recovery. I was so passionate and threw myself into my work. What began to happen was that I was easily overwhelmed by the suffering I found myself witnessing in others. There was too much to do and I had no idea how to manage the tension between committing myself to social justice work but also the difficulties that this inevitably meant in not being able to make the change as rapidly or successfully as I wanted. There were small gains and I paid a price for this. My mental health declined and I was continually just getting by. Looking back now it is so easy to see that I put everyone else's needs before my own. It was a melting pot for me of early catastrophic trauma, over emphasis on others and a lack of understanding of my own needs that lead me into a world of darkness. I developed

incredible coping mechanisms to be able to deal with the crushing deficit of complex trauma. I became an adept 'actor' able to copy others social cues, able to relate however it was superficial (to some extent). This isn't to say that relationships that I forged early in my life were built on nothingness, it is to acknowledge that my inner world was so painful and parts of it were so off limits that I needed to employ a robust system of denial to ensure that I was able to function. During these years yoga was important to me. I think it helped me keep myself together. I spent some months in India studying with a local guru and found it cathartic and began to focus more on what I needed in my life. However it wasn't until a few years later, when I was in a very safe place personally that I was able to do the deep healing that I needed to be able to feel the wholeness that I craved.

During the birth of my first daughter, I saw clearly that there was a journey ahead of me. It would be the most difficult of journey's and I had to foster courage in a way I had never known before and will never know again to be able to take it. Healing an internal fracture of complex trauma is fierce work. Despite surrounding myself in understanding this from absolutely every angle I could, when it came my time to walk inwards and pick up the shattered pieces of myself, there was nothing that could prepare me for the pain. The pain. It was the most excruciating pain. It took me some years to begin to reconnect with the lost parts of myself. Yoga played a part in the piecing of myself back together. I wanted it to play the biggest part however it was merely one of a few processes that I really needed to commit to in order to be able to become whole. However trauma that is relationally derived, that is, it has occurred from human to human requires that this be re-built in relationship. I rebuilt my sense of self, that had been decimated due to child sexual abuse and emotional harm through a process of counselling, yoga which occurred in a context of a stable and supportive partnership with Aaron, my husband. I redeveloped a connection to the world around me including the seasons, the land and the people in my community. I let it in and felt what I had been unable to feel. Of course, the feeling of resurfacing of pain meant that I could now feel deep and true love. The process of learning to love, meant that I had to rediscover what it meant to trust. I was like a child in this regards. Truly looking at the world anew. I was teaching my two children at the same time that I was learning this myself. As I parented them, I re-parented myself. There was so much guilt and shame around

this however with time and the right advice I was able to free myself from this kind of thinking to accept my life the way it had been.

Finding all aspects of myself meant discovering what I loved, what I was talented at, what I wanted to do and where I wanted to spend my time. I sat with so many questions and like us all, had to stay with the ambiguity when there were no answers. My deep heartfelt desire to use my voice for change grew stronger, more meaningful and richer through experience. I began to be able to understand my boundaries and my need for rest and replenishment. I also learned that there were types of social justice work that I couldn't do, without the burden for my emotional and physical health being too great. Through healing the scars of my trauma, I grew confident that there was so much hope for our world. In fact I learned that we were sitting on a gold mine of potential for love and compassion. I re-committed to learning and teaching others about the possibility of wholeness, even after the worst. I found meaning for suffering. I found ways to be able to navigate difficulties. This experience of healing and subsequent recovery has enabled me to know myself more fully. Many people just have this and conduct their lives from a secure foundation. I didn't have this earlier in my life and the knowledge of its existence and the deeper connection I feel as a result of being able to navigate my inner world has bought me such contentment. My commitment to social justice and human rights changed as a result. I became broader in my thinking and also more concerned about the way in which we treat each other. I could see that we could truly prevent such harm from happening to others and could also support others to heal. Healing is the ultimate symbol of hope. Healing isn't about perfection or not being impacted on by the past, sometimes that is impossible. Healing is about being able to live with yourself, exactly as you are. This is the more radical journey to take and this is the one that is to be spoken and taught. Like so many before me, I have utilised the voice of justice to give meaning and shape to my own experiences of trauma. There is a well worn path now of those of us who have utilised our experiences of pain to enrich life meaning and to shape existence.

## **5.11 Case Study Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the research case studies as the stories of the participants. Their experiences demonstrate a journey that has been formative in the process of intermingling yoga and human rights to build engaged yoga as something that is now tangible. The participants' knowledge illuminates the way that the coupling between yoga and human rights has developed. It is clear that they have each pioneered ideas, projects and much more. Their offerings are meaningful and rich, and have grown and will continue to grow. To synthesise their stories, I have merged their words and teaching into themes. These themes are the most prominent features that I believe to demonstrate engaged yoga at this time. In the following chapter, I outline the themes and subthemes that emerged from the research. The process that I used was outlined during Chapter 2. To briefly recap, I employed a hands-on process of data analysis following a set of steps and deep immersion in the data. This also involved standing back from the data to view them from an alternative perspective.

#### **5.11.1 Themes Emerging from Data**

The data demonstrated the notion of engaged yoga having both an inner element, self responsibility and an outer element, meaningful actions. This was previously mentioned in the Chapter 3 discussion regarding the similar framework of engaged Buddhism. After undertaking the process of 'deeply knowing the data', the following themes emerged.

##### *5.11.1.1 Self Responsibility*

This theme emerged from the participants' actions, words and expressions. Subcategories were expressed as the experiences of healing; transformation; growth; sustainable practice; dealing with illness, grief and trauma; reflection; self-growth; personal values and ethics. These were then further distilled into the subheadings of:

- becoming an empowered agent of change
- yoga practices sustaining activism
- trauma, mental health and illness recovery
- entwining spiritual beliefs.

##### *5.11.1.2 Meaningful Actions*



The participants actively demonstrated their own interpretation of human rights as a grounded and everyday practice. The emerging themes included compassion, therapeutic yoga for trauma and pain, and building community. These were further divided into the following subheadings:

- leading others back to embodiment
- healing scars with trauma-sensitive yoga teaching
- drawing on anti-oppressive practices and principles
- redefining the role of the yoga teacher
- building communities of engaged yoga.

## **5.2 Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has methodically discussed each participant through individual case studies, and presented their data in a structured manner, so that the reader can gain a sense of the participants' experience of activating human rights through engaged yoga. The case study participants' diverse experiences highlight the intricacies of engaged yoga and the intermingling of self in relation with other. From this chapter, the thesis moves onto the discussion chapters, which each address one of the themes above. Chapter 6 discusses the theme of 'responsibility for self', while Chapter 7 discusses the theme of 'meaningful actions'.

## **Chapter 6: Engaged Yoga as Self Responsibility**

The following chapter further dissects the way engaged yoga was demonstrated among the study cohort. In doing so, this chapter builds a credible argument that engaged yoga is considered a flourishing form of activism that is demarcated by the presence of particular attributes. As outlined at the end of Chapter 5, the findings were divided into two major themes and further subthemes. It is noteworthy that, at times, it was challenging to separate the ‘inner’ experience from the ‘outer’ experience, and the separation caused some conflicts. However, the following is my attempt to convey the information in a linear and concrete manner. This chapter argues that engaged yoga is exemplified through the characteristics that were seen in each of the research participants. This is supported by the rich discussion that the data provided. The themes have been converted into subject headings to form a credible sense of engaged yoga. The headings in this chapter are as follows:

- becoming empowered agents of change
- yoga as a sustaining tool for activism
- recovery from suffering: mental ill health and trauma
- entwining spiritual identities.

These themes were the most significant markers apparent in this research of engaged yoga as it specifically pertained to the activists’ inner experience. This chapter follows the themes and discusses some of the subthemes that emerged in relation to these ideas. The results indicate that the participants’ inner realm is central to the work of engaged yoga. Rather than denying personal struggles, self-knowledge is part of the basis for connection and is seen as critical to understanding human relatedness. Engaged yoga provides beneficial knowledge and practices for activists, who are prone to stress and burnout. Therefore, an inbuilt approach to self-care is generated through the enquiry, which can benefit activists throughout their work and personal life. The process of recovery is also central to the inner life of engaged yoga. Obstacles such as ill health and trauma are considered part of the journey of life, and there is potential to learn and grow from even some of the most difficult life experiences. Framing recovery as

possible through small everyday occurrences builds the capacity for hope, which is considered a central aim of the contemporary human rights discourse.

Finally, the participants have each developed their own spiritual beliefs and understandings. It is clear that there is no specific religious or spiritual standpoint upon which to situate engaged yoga. The participants each add their own beliefs and knowledge, thereby demonstrating the flexibility of engaged yoga. What is emphasised in their different forms of spirituality is the foundation of kindness, compassion for the self and love. This message is the focus of the outer world of engaged yoga, with the case studies highlighting the way individuals can attempt to demonstrate these approaches in the world.

## **6.1 Becoming Empowered Agents of Change**

The purpose of this research was to explore the participants' relationship between their experiences of yoga practice and their understanding of human rights. It is clear that the most significant way that the engaged yoga activists demonstrate this relationship is through action. It is refreshing to reframe human rights as action to promote human relatedness through the expression of those who take action.

Engaged yoga's emphasis on the experiences of the activist challenges views regarding the notion of activism. The case study participants—Andi, Molly, Seane, Narayan, Sarah, Jill, Hala and Jessica—each demonstrated willingness to look within themselves towards their inner experience, and this was a key component to engaged yoga. Not only did they seek inner or self-knowledge, they agreed that this was critical to understanding themselves in the world, which was subsequently central to engaged yoga. Therefore, this observable quality of the participants exemplifies that engaged yoga actively engages in self-reflection and contemplation as central to activism, not separate to it.

In engaged yoga, self-enquiry paves the way towards an active relationship with the self and other. This approach actively encourages engagement with the experience of the activist, which I consider demonstrative of human rights relatedness. For example, Molly, Andi, Narayan, Seane, Jill, Hala, Jessica and Sarah exemplified their life experiences as part of the process of bettering humanity, not separate to it. In this study, engaged yoga explores human relatedness as enacted from a place of self-responsibility

through commitment to self-enquiry in order to more acutely understand the knowledge, assumptions, thoughts and belief systems that we each bring to the experience of human relatedness.

### **The Prelude to Activism**

The study participants' interest in human rights activism was long term, spanning from 10 years (Andi) to 35 years (Narayan) of activism. Each participant had different life circumstances that preluded their development of engaged yoga; however, overall, their stories echoed continual professional development, including self-mastery, creative development of community programs and community leadership. In this manner, engaged yoga involves development of knowledge and skills through multiple fields and avenues over a sustained period. Some of the reasons the participants gave for their interest in activism included the following. Andi, Sarah and Seane described the area of human rights as something that had been important to them early in their lives. They did not necessarily credit it to any specific experience; however, they knew that it was important to them to be vocal spokespeople in this space. They considered it a personal value to speak out against injustice. Although both Andi and Seane reported sexual trauma and Sarah experienced emotional turmoil early in their lives, they stated that their inclination to social justice pre-dated their assaults:

As my often parents told me, I came into the world enraged. I would be very overwhelmed, very intense when people were being wrongly judged, bullied or prosecuted. My parents would tell me that was how I was since the day I was born.

Molly and Jessica both stated that their interest in human rights stemmed from being raised in Christian households, where the value of giving to others was fundamental to their beliefs. Narayan stated that his interest derived from his early experiences of marginalisation and from being exposed to social justice concepts through his mother's care for his disabled brother, coupled with exposure to the work of Mahatma Ghandi. Hala stated that her immigrant background alerted her to marginalisation and set the scene to embark on a lifetime of activism. Jill became an activist later in her life because of feeling compassion towards individuals who were suffering, particularly people experiencing unresolved pain and dissatisfaction with their current healthcare model. Overall, among the study participants, an interest in human rights was generally developed early in life, based on personality, family values and life experiences. For

some, the interest in yoga began later in life. However, there were no sharp edges in the way this discovery occurred for the case study participants, and it is significant that the journey continued to deepen and evolve for each of them as they shared their experiences.

Each participant's case study captured the factors that they believed were preludes to their lives as activists. Understanding the influences that affected the participants' involvement in activism provides a specific perspective into the area of engaged yoga activists. Activism does not constitute a specific profession. As Redhead and Turnbull stated:

Human rights is being defined more expansively by practitioners. The weakness of international institutions and the interpretive scope of human rights discourse produce significant opportunity for practitioners to interpret the meaning of human rights (2011, p. 172).

As the meaning of human rights is further explored, the way human rights are enacted in the local and broader global community also expands. Broadening the understandings of those who identify as being activists provides more space for those who may not have previously identified their work as activism because of the narrow view of what this generally involves. In this manner, there become more permeable parameters, broader scope and the possibility of increasing participation and access to participation through viewing activists as everyday people who use the scope of their life for change. This also involves the way in which activism is part of the human rights discourse.

As human rights moves from the cordoned off areas of law and philosophy, there is a requirement for further understanding of this phenomena. Redhead and Turnbull (2011, p. 174) asserted that 'the question of how activists and others practice human rights is not immediately obvious'. With this in mind, consideration of the way people become activists is a part of deepening understanding in this varied area. The term 'activist' often conjures a certain type of activity most often associated with demonstrations and protests. However, it is noteworthy that the terms 'activism' and 'activist' demonstrate more nuanced understandings. Allowing these terms to have broad definitions encourages activism to be seen in many different ways and to be less focused on a specific approach and more focused on facilitating and enabling change and growth in

people, communities and the broader sphere. Understanding the journey into activism provides deeper insight into this field that is, by nature, difficult to contain.

It is important to develop an understanding of why each of the case study participants were drawn to this work, as this may help explore potential issues and challenges that can be encountered in activism. For example, considering the related field of social and welfare work, understanding social workers' motivation is significant. The reasons that social workers enter the field of social change (which includes activism) are considered influential for how social workers think about their work (Mensinga 2009, O'Connor 2003). Like other professions that are built on the notion of care, utilising the platform of interpersonal dialogue, the 'skilful, disciplined use of the self' is central to the day to day work (O'Connor et al. 2003, p. 53). Therefore acknowledging ones' motivations for this kind of work and the expectations that this can bring is central to sustainable and effective activism (O'Connor et al. 2003, Mensinga 2009). Some professions spend considerable time in their training to develop this reflective understanding of their investment in caring, I consider this essential in the area of engaged activism.

Becoming an engaged yoga activist may not necessarily be attributable to career choice—for most of the participants, it was described as a congruent way of life that fuses experiences, knowledge and values with services to meet identifiable need. While all of the participants were leaders in their areas, they did not necessarily describe their work as a career—rather, they likened it to life purpose. It is important to explore and understand the pathways into activism, as they provide foundational insight into activists' personal backgrounds and belief systems. This has a plausible effect on any educational training or ongoing learning that may be appropriate to activists in these areas. This study indicates that becoming an activist occurs through multiple avenues, and many factors spark an interest in this approach to life. Moreover, it continues being fostered in people throughout their life.

### **Finding Yoga**

Despite yoga studios being on most streets of city precincts, there remains the notion of 'finding' yoga. This concept probably indicates the deepening relationship with oneself that individuals can find through yoga. A deeper understanding of engaged yoga is supported by yoga practice, philosophy and teaching that has been cultivated over time.

The case participants spanned five years (Jessica) to 42 years (Jill) of yoga practice. Despite the burgeoning popularity of yoga, little is known about the reasons that people are drawn to the practice. A number of small studies have examined some of the reasons for the adoption of yoga practice. In 2014, a national study was undertaken in the US, comprising a cohort of 360 yoga students and 156 yoga teachers, which established the reasons why people begin to practice yoga (Park et al. 2014). The results confirmed that the reasons reported by students and teachers were the same. The most reported reasons for beginning yoga were to exercise, increase flexibility and find stress relief. In addition, Park et al. (2014) concluded that many who continued to practice adopted additional reasons for practising, which were most prominently (for teachers and students alike) spiritual reasons. Overall, the current study participants' experiences supported the research of Park et al. (2014). The identified reasons for beginning yoga were for fitness and health benefits initially, and these reasons gradually changed. The case study participants each displayed a similar progression in understanding yoga and its deepening benefits. Understanding this provides benefit in engaged yoga. The only exception was Andi's case, given that her interest in yoga began as a way to resolve stress and overcome a traumatic event.

Given the way that yoga is constructed as a physical fitness activity, it can be difficult to understand the way that embodied self-awareness can be cultivated through yoga practice and to conceptualise engaged yoga as a dynamic approach to activism. However, this limited view creates opportunities to develop understandings of yoga in the mainstream community, beyond the notion of exercise and into the realm of self-awareness. Without filling this gap, it is safe to assume that it can be complicated to understand the way that yoga can benefit human rights activists and the human rights project at large. As was the case in Park et al.'s (2014) study, in the current study, the participants (except for Andi) began yoga for physical and wellness reasons. Eventually, this began to develop into a deeper practice that encompassed emotional, self-awareness and spiritual aspects. With hindsight, five of the eight participants said they believed they were drawn to yoga for deeper healing; however, what this meant changed over time. In retrospect, they realised they were looking for 'something'. The way the participants deepened their knowledge of yoga over a period demonstrates the subtle layers of yoga practice, and supports Park et al. (2014) that yoga is a deepening

experience for practitioners, and this includes the dimensions of yoga practice that may be considered spiritual.

## **6.2 Yoga as a Sustaining Tool for Activism**

Burnout or stress has become synonymous with activist communities. Giving to others without adequately investing in one's own needs is an ideal situation for experiencing burnout. Regarding help seeking, it is now understood that help is often wanted in activist communities, yet self-care knowledge is relatively uncommon (Gorski & Chen 2015). However, as a marked divergence, in this study's cohort of engaged yoga practitioners, the participants had already established an understanding of self-care. This is presumably because yoga is a vehicle of self-knowledge and a recommended tool for self-care. However, the case study participants did not only use yoga as self-care—they also had other robust management practices for self-care that included strategies such as talking therapy, tai chi, yoga, meditation, prayer, a healthy diet and creating time for pleasurable pursuits.

The self-care approach of the case study participants differs significantly from other interpretations of self-care in activism. The participants did not view self-care as an afterthought to manage burnout—they described it as part of their lifestyle. Gorski (2015) stated that, in social justice movements, the idea of self-care is often relegated to indulgence, which places activists at greater risk of burnout. In contrast, this study's engaged yoga activists had a more deeply developed understanding of their self-care needs than is suggested by previous research. The practices of yoga involve practices of wellbeing; thus, engaged yoga is a potent mix that credibly articulates both the need to tend to oneself and be an active agent of change. A striking commonality in this study was the way the participants could articulate their self-care needs as they related to their balance between home and work life.

Maslach (2016 p. 104) referred to burnout as 'a psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job...it includes overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job. In contrast to having one bad day, burnout is a chronic condition in which individuals become mentally exhausted and debilitated on a long-term basis (Maslach & Leiter 2005). The current study did not specifically examine the loss of spirit that may signify



burnout; however, the case studies evidenced a group of people who were motivated, inspired and committed to their work. Narayan, Andi, Seane and Hala specifically discussed that there was a tendency for activists to overwork based on compassion. For example, Narayan took opposition to the way compassion can be constructed in social justice settings. He felt it was often over-indulged and unhealthy. Seane spoke about what she referred to as ‘shadow tendencies’ in activism, which involve perpetuating the needs of the activist, rather than the needs of the individual and community recipients. Being able to explore the way that individuals indulge in creating a sense of identity and esteem from their activism is an integral part of self-knowledge that supports understanding of and deeper listening to the needs of others.

Sarah divulged that her tendency to over-identify with others was unhelpful in her role as an activist, and has been the catalyst for her experiences of burnout. However, her experience of reoccurring burnout led her deeper into understanding her own needs and the effect of her choices on herself. Andi actively challenged the culture of activist communities, which she felt coveted self-denial. The self-knowledge and subsequent self-care seen in the case study participants meant that they became able to critique the culture of selflessness that has been reported in activism, alongside denial of the personal encounters, growth, needs and even joys that derive from activism. Challenging the culture of selflessness provided boundaries to be able to engage without denying their own needs. This discussion is a refreshing difference to the way that the self can be denied in activist communities, with sometimes devastating results for all involved. Being aware of what has instigated our own activism can be liberating; can enable a more honest human encounter; and can challenge the notion of needing to fix, help or save other people that has become ingrained into elements of the activist community, with dire consequences.

Supporting others is central to the role of activists, and this means that self-care can sometimes be problematic to negotiate or even relegated as a burdensome necessity that is only completed to continue the work of the organisation (Gorski & Chen 2015). The reluctance of activists to engage in self-care discussions stems from the notion that self-care is indulgent and self-serving (Gorski 2015). This places activist self-care as a sensitive area to traverse, with delicate barriers to understanding its specific dimensions. However, being continually immersed in suffering leaves activists vulnerable to the heavy emotional labour of activism (Goodwin & Phaff 2001). Emotional labour can be

unrecognised by individuals and organisations alike, rendering activists susceptible to burnout and stress. This emotional burden has implications for individual wellbeing, as well as for the ongoing functioning of the activism. As well as the personal implications of burnout being ignored, there is also little attention devoted to the way that activist groups can act as barriers to the progress that they aspire to make (Gorski 2015). The engaged yoga approach demonstrated in the case studies generally defied the trend regarding self-denial that exists among the helping professions and activism. While Sarah discussed a time earlier in her life and career when she had held these unhelpful views, she went on to state that she had developed strategies to ensure she did not continue this trend. Indeed, she had deep personal insight in this area.

### **Managing Stress, Burnout and Vicarious Traumatization**

Yoga, particularly as an integrated approach, has been demonstrated to effectively remedy experiences of stress, anxiety and depression, as well as the closely associated burnout and vicarious traumatization (da Silva, Ravindran & Ravindran 2009; Pilkington et al. 2005). In general, this research adds to the growing body of knowledge that legitimises yoga as a helpful way to manage stress, anxiety, depression and other related mental health concerns. While there are limitations to its applicability, it is clear that each of the study participants had experienced yoga as a helpful way to deal with the stress of being human. This research also captures a detailed description of the way the participants believed yoga has been helpful for them in their work situations.

As well as generally confirming yoga as a helpful intervention for stress-related conditions, this research offers an additional insight. While there has been much research about yoga, there has been limited research regarding yoga teachers who experience stress. Yoga teachers have not been the specific targets of research, and it adds another dimension to understanding and future needs. It places the participants as experiential learners of their art, as well as established teachers. Yoga teachers are often known for possessing qualities such as calmness, connectedness and mindfulness. However, this research reveals that these qualities are cultivated through commitment, usually over a long period. This research also establishes that yoga teachers will experience all the inevitable challenges of life, including mental ill health.

This research contributes knowledge regarding the way that yoga teachers may simultaneously provide classes and courses that encourage stress relief and trauma treatment, while also having experienced some of these symptoms or experiences themselves. This paints a different picture to the expectant gaze of spiritual, physical and mental perfectionism that has been developed in the yoga world, which seeks authentic spirituality taught by teachers who are not afflicted by human difficulties. One way of experiencing stress is through burnout or vicarious traumatisation. The case study participants highlighted joint experiences of burnout and vicarious traumatisation.

In some manner, each of the participants demonstrated their susceptibility to burnout and vicarious trauma in their line of work. Through the nature of the work and knowledge involved in activism, activists become conscious of the level of suffering that may be experienced by marginalised people and groups. This knowledge leaves activists vulnerable to the heavy burden of the emotional labour of activism (Goodwin & Phaff 2001). Burnout is a chronic condition that has debilitating and long-term implications (Maslach & Gomes 2005). Andi, Narayan, Sarah, Seane and Hala mentioned having experienced burnout; however, they had developed strategies to help prevent this from reoccurring. The five participants who experienced burnout also discussed the way they had overcome burnout through a more sustainable approach to their work and life balance.

There have been some major shifts in the helping communities (in which engaged yoga is situated) that recognise the cost of being a caring professional. This recognition has been understood through multiple domains, including the areas of burnout, vicarious traumatisation and the discourse of self-care, as well as the closely related area of appropriate boundaries between the self and other. Therefore, as well as understanding self-care as an integral feature of sustainable activism, the case study participants highlighted the need for boundaries in terms of the way individuals devote themselves to their personal causes and pursuits.

Engaged yoga is a distinct way of activating human rights relatedness, and there appear to be benefits to such an approach regarding the way the layered areas of vulnerability in the activist community are supported. Engaged yoga has the ability to provide an inbuilt language of self-care and a suite of practices and tools ideal to enhance self-care,

prevent burnout and manage the pervasive underlying culture that can be part of activism.

### **6.3 Recovery from Suffering: Mental Ill Health and Trauma**

A significant discovery of this research was that four of the eight participants interviewed had experienced sexual assault, sexual abuse, emotional harm and/or physical assault, and/or had witnessed domestic violence in their history. This finding is not of significance because these findings are uncommon—it is well understood that trauma and mental ill health commonly occur. However, it is less well known that professionals working in mental health recovery have also experienced trauma and mental ill health. Andi, Seane, Narayan and Sarah. Narayan, Sarah and Seane stated that their earliest trauma was in their childhood. Adverse childhood experiences had not received significant attention until recent discoveries that early traumatic experiences in the developing child are critical in the formation of self-identity, with lifelong implications for wellbeing (van der Kolk 2014). While there has been an increase in understandings of trauma-related mental health issues, there is still significant growth required in this field, particularly in relation to practitioners, activists and health providers, and their experiences of trauma and mental ill health. Despite this study's small cohort size, this is a significant discovery because it provides a critical context that can often be overlooked through the professionalism of activism and recovery-based mental health work, such as trauma-sensitive yoga. The experiences of these activists, which included early childhood trauma, were a prelude to exploring healing, yoga and human rights. While it is unclear the extent to which these two areas were linked, it is evident that the lived experience of these difficulties provided a perspective from which to develop a deep understanding of areas such as trauma recovery and mental health recovery.

The case study participants Seane, Sarah, Narayan and Andy explained that the practices of yoga were essential for them to overcome the effect of trauma. They gravitated towards yoga because they felt it would be of some benefit to them. Most compellingly, the ability to stay with difficult sensations—such as trauma-related anxiety, discomfort and disassociation—offered them the most support. They were all drawn to yoga as a vehicle for learning and transformation from trauma, even before there was significant credible research to establish the way that yoga can support

healing from trauma, as well as research that has uncovered the limitations and contraindications of yoga in recovery from trauma.

Narayan, Seane and Hala learnt that merely practising yoga was not necessarily sufficient for trauma recovery. Narayan stated that he found trying to engage in the dynamic practices of asana during the recovery period was unhelpful because of the sensitisation that had occurred to him as a result trauma. Learning how to relate compassionately to this experience by practising postures that allowed for integration was more helpful to his recovery experience. Without necessarily understanding the way that yoga supported their recovery from trauma, these participants experimented with their recovery, and their insights support the established research that suggests that yoga can be a helpful part of trauma recovery. Narayan's insights into the specific need for treatment to be targeted, gentle and based on integration of sensation are also helpful. Given the many different ways that yoga can be understood, taught and practised, it is valuable to hear that general classes do not always support safe integration of complex trauma. Thus, the need for specialised treatment is critical.

However, more generally speaking, van der Kolk (2014) stated that, in some way, we have all experienced traumatic events. Traumatic experiences are a typical part of the life experience. We can differentiate between 'capital T trauma'—which is seen among individuals who experience early childhood abuse, torture and/or sustained violence in adulthood—and 'lowercase t trauma'—which is a more acute trauma often experienced after traffic accidents, during natural disasters and among war veterans or emergency services staff (van der Kolk 2014). While it is unhelpful to develop a hierarchy of trauma, it is vital that the differences are acknowledged because many of the treatments for acute trauma do not effectively resolve complex trauma. Indeed, complex trauma has no standardised treatment. Instead, it is seen as a group of approaches and treatments that seek to resolve the trauma's effects.

Much of the research around yoga and trauma has been undertaken in relation to the specific presentation of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Emerson & Hopper 2011). However, trauma can be significantly broader and more complex than a diagnosis of PTSD. Thus, continuing to categorise complex trauma as PTSD can be deeply unhelpful to people whose experiences result in much more entrenched symptoms and scarring because of the origins of their trauma experiences. Over the past

decade, as a result of being unable to cram the experiences of trauma into the narrow definitions that have become accepted in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, new understanding of trauma have emerged (van der Kolk 2014). This led to coining of the term ‘complex trauma’, which is an attempt to describe ‘the more profound sequelae associated with living in a prolonged environment of maltreatment and neglect’ (Emerson & Hopper 2012, p. 15). Complex trauma includes the breadth of the following conditions: affect dysregulation, disassociation, somatic difficulties, negative self-image, impaired ability to navigate relationships (relationship rupture) and devastation of one’s fundamental beliefs and systems of meaning. In social terms, this can result in interpersonal difficulty and the inability to find and sustain work. The coining and subsequent understanding of mental ill health from a trauma-informed perspective—such as the differentiation of complex trauma—provides one of the more compelling insights for treatment in recent years.

In the current study, the experiences regarding child sexual abuse, domestic and physical violence and emotional harm fall under the broad category of complex trauma. In the case studies, Seane, Narayan and Sarah reported adverse childhood experiences of trauma. Seane explained that, at six years old, she was sexually abused, which resulted in trauma symptoms and eventually included a diagnosis of obsessive-compulsive disorder. The abuse had significant effects on her emotional, mental and spiritual wellbeing. In alignment with understandings of the ways to address childhood trauma, Seane has accessed a range of healing approaches, and continues to use talking and bodily therapies to enable cohesive wellness. Seane described using a range of approaches to recovery. She explained that her healing experience was phased, and involved bodily therapy through yoga, as well as talking therapy. Her approach includes ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ approaches, and is used by the leading research facility for trauma treatment (van der Kolk 2014). The term ‘bottom-up’ illustrates the use of bodily therapy to integrate aspects of the body, while ‘top-down’ refers to talking therapy. It is through these combined approaches that people seem to be integrating the experience to become a cohesive life narrative (Siegel 2016).

Narayan explained that he suffered significant physical and emotional abuse from within his family. He witnessed ongoing domestic violence between his parents. In addition, he had an intellectually impaired brother who required substantial support, and his family’s social circumstances and the stigma of intellectual disability placed

additional pressure on his family. Narayan suffered depression, anxiety and other trauma-related ill health. He reported having incredible attention issues and short-term memory difficulties. It took him many years to heal from the cumulative trauma he experienced. He explained that he had a very different recovery outcome from his sibling, who experienced similar harms. His sibling has been unable to effectively resolve her experiences of trauma, despite accessing some of the same services. Yoga has provided Narayan with a helpful pathway to integrate his experience. He found the breathing exercises and the philosophy of *ahimsa* to be integral to his recovery. However, he cautioned that most yoga styles will not be trauma informed because they are designed for people who are already healthy. He suggested restorative and therapeutic yoga as the only specific treatment for trauma.

Sarah reported dealing with the separation of her parents early in her life, and significant difficulties involved with living with both of her parents. During her teenage years, she also suffered from disordered eating and, later, significant mental health complications. Although she did not draw any relationship between her early childhood adversity and later mental health complications, it is the representation of her story in sequence. She credited yoga as being a space that she found early in her life that provided healing from the effects of her complex trauma.

Seane, Narayan and Sarah's examples demonstrate yoga as a specific intervention to support recovery from trauma, particularly the symptoms of anxiety and emotional pain (Emerson & Hopper 2012). As discussed above, drawing the body into practice is a recent area of interest in the mental health field, and yoga has emerged as a preferential way of achieving this. Yoga can be used by trauma survivors without the need for the touch of other people, and it has generally gained popularity in mental health approaches. This paper's case studies are useful illustrations of the way that yoga can support integration and recovery from trauma. This confirms the existing research that positions trauma-sensitive yoga and yoga therapeutic approaches as necessary to work with the specific manifestations of different illnesses and trauma. However, treating trauma and illness in general classes by teachers without experience in these areas can be misleading and dangerous. More specification is needed as yoga emerges as a treatment possibility.

As well as highlighting the ways that yoga for trauma recovery can operate through rich textual description, this study has started a conversation that I believe to be critically needed in the mental health, yoga and activist communities. This conversation focuses on the lived experiences of teachers and activists who experience mental ill health and trauma recovery. There are specific issues involved in disclosing mental ill health when in a position of power and teaching, and I believe there are specific issues around disclosure, stigma and shame for people who are specialists in the area of treating mental ill health. I believe that the case study participants' acknowledgement of their lived experiences and current struggles is a dynamic action that will support others in similar positions to feel more comfortable with their own stories of recovery.

This came to light during writing this thesis, through the news of the death of Michael Stone. I drew heavily on Stone's knowledge in this thesis, and was deeply saddened to hear that, in July 2017, he passed away following a fatal overdose from street drugs (at the time of writing, the coroner's report was not public). His death came as a shock to the yoga community, and his partner generously provided some explanation. Via Stone's Facebook page, his partner told the community that Stone had bipolar disorder, and this had not improved through his meditation efforts over many years. In fact, it seemed to have worsened, and his symptoms needed to be managed by medication. His reluctance to discuss his mental illness can be understood based on the difficulty encountered in being a teacher of this method and a sufferer of mental illness. There is no doubt that this experience was difficult for Stone and his family. Stone's circumstances exemplify that the dual experience of being both a teacher and a human being must be acknowledged to ensure that teachers know they can ask for help and disclose their circumstances to the community if they wish.

It is noteworthy that Stone's partner discussed how Stone was troubled about whether to disclose his experiences of mental ill health. She believed he was very close to being able to share this with the broader community; however, he did not undertake this before he died. One can only wonder what effects Stone would have felt by sharing his mental health diagnosis—whether it would have been a comfort and a way to deepen his acceptance of this illness, or a further destabilising. His death led to lengthy discussions about teachers of yoga and meditation, and their own challenges with mental health issues. Continuing this discussion is important to highlight that being a



teacher and knowing the strategies for mental health treatment does not necessarily protect one from serious ill health.

Based on the case study participants' discussions of their experiences of early engagement with yoga and activism, overcoming burnout, and recovery from trauma and mental ill health, this chapter now moves towards discussing their experiences of wellbeing and flourishing.

### **Compassion for Self**

Closely related to self-care, mental illness and trauma recovery is growth of compassion for the self. The case study stories revealed a common thread that appeared to run through all the participants' experiences of developing the inner relationship—the ability to relate to oneself with greater compassion.

Jessica discussed the way she learnt to give herself the break she needed and allow herself the space to simply feel sad. This exemplifies an act of self-compassion that lovingly embraces the present moment with warmth. Hala explained that she was disconnected from her body, particularly in her early years. To establish a connected relationship, she needed to heal her disconnect, which was achieved through developing a loving relationship with herself. As she furthered her journey into yoga and self-development work in general, she developed the capacity to listen to what she needed and to respond with a sense of compassion. Including the self in the realm of compassion is a significant demarcation of engaged yoga. It provides a way for the study participants to learn to relate to their own experience. Adding depth of self-compassion to the way we relate to ourselves provides a way to relate that does not rely on feeling good, as with self-esteem (Neff 2015). This paves the way to be able to create coherency, even during times of difficulty.

### **Towards Wellbeing and Flourishing**

Thus far, the experiences of the participants have focused on self-care and process. However, it was also clear that the participants were strong, resilient and 'flourishing'. As discussed earlier, instances of burnout in activist communities are significant, which makes the dialogue regarding self-care compelling. It was demonstrated in this study that the relationship with self-care was more linked to current individual experiences of

flourishing and wellbeing than a lack of self-care linked to burnout. The notion of human flourishing has emerged from the area of positive psychology and evolved over years of practice and research:

I used to think that the topic of positive psychology was happiness, that the gold standard for measuring happiness was life satisfaction, and that the goal of positive psychology was to increase life satisfaction. I now think the topic of positive psychology is well-being, that the gold standard for measuring well-being is flourishing, and that the goal of positive psychology is to increase flourishing (Seligman 2011, p. 13).

Positive psychology is now used to encourage individual flourishing. Flourishing comprises such areas as positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships and accomplishment (Seligman 2011). Within the study cohort, five participants—Narayan, Seane, Hala, Jill and Sarah—indicated that they were experiencing a peak in flourishing and psychological wellbeing. This ranged from feeling that their lives were imbued with meaning, to exuding a sense of purpose, contentment and self-knowledge. For example, Jill was healed from a chronic pain condition that she had lived with for many years. She reported being content, inspired and motivated to share her knowledge with others. This was evidenced by her activities, which included multiple offerings and creations. Hala reported a more loving relationship with her body and self. She was joyful, focused and determined to be of service, particularly in the area of trauma-informed practice. Sarah reported a newfound ability to be able to balance the highs and lows of her diagnosed bipolar disorder, and was able to support others with disordered eating, anxiety and depression. She found writing and sharing her experiences to be healing and helpful. Seane demonstrated flourishing and wellbeing through speaking about herself as dynamic, healthy and generally feeling content:

Now, at 47 [years old], I feel like the same dynamic eight-year-old I was. I feel like I've come full circle ... I'm healthy. I know yoga gave me that. I still feel good in my body. I know how to hold the space not just for my emotions, but for others as well. It's my whole life.

Narayan stated that he has undergone a holistic transformation into a state of flourishing: 'In every aspect—spiritually, mentally, physically, economically, socially—all of these things have been the transformation I have had because of yoga'.

In addition to establishing that this cohort appeared to demonstrate and articulate the experience of flourishing, these findings also support previous research that posits yoga as a tool to aid wellbeing. Conboy, Wilson and Braun (2010, p. 790) stated that, while there is interest in yoga as a practice to enhance psychological wellbeing, there have been few studies specifically targeting interventions focused on this. To remedy this, they conducted a study on the effect of a one-month yoga training program, with the intent of gathering data regarding higher states of psychological wellbeing. Their study participants evidenced some changes—most significantly in relation to the measure of optimism (a positive psychology research measure) (Conboy, Wilson & Braun 2010).

The recent focus on wellbeing is demonstrative of a shift in views of mental health that consider more than just the absence of disease (Keyes). Keyes stated that:

individuals are functioning well when they like most parts of themselves, have warm and trusting relationships, see themselves developing into better people, have a direction in life, are able to shape their environments to satisfy their needs, and have a degree of self-determination (2005, p. 540).

Moving from the dominant mental health model of curing disease towards a wellbeing-focused approach has seen a surge in research on psychological wellbeing. The case studies of Narayan, Seane, Hala, Jill and Sarah demonstrated that long-term yoga practice can support the experience of flourishing. Thus, engaged yoga has emerged as a framework to enact this experience. Flourishing appears to occur through the combination of personal wellbeing and life purpose, which is united by engaged yoga. This flourishing appears to arise because of the combined influence of yoga as a practice of wellbeing, as well as the reclamation of a space for self-care. Alongside the benefits of self-care and mental health and trauma recovery, the case study participants appeared able to make sense of their own journeys and support healing in others in their community. Over many years, the participants had drawn together these factors and committed to the approach beyond their professional identity to become a way of life. From here, the chapter moves to discussing the participants' spiritual beliefs.

## **6.4 Entwining Spiritual Identities**

In a general sense, the notion of spirituality emerged as a theme in the case studies. Closely linked to spiritual beliefs and identity was the study of religion and ethical

beliefs. The case study participants demonstrated a ‘tapestry’ approach to spiritual identity. For example, Seane illustrated how her beliefs were affected by yoga philosophy, ethics, her Jewish culture and a belief in God.

For all the case study participants, spirituality was a mixture of approaches that crossed boundaries, and borrowed and reinterpreted teachings and beliefs. Two participants, Molly and Seane, easily combined belief in God with practices of meditation. Jill described her beliefs as steeped in Buddhism, while Jessica identified as Christian and rejected some aspects of yoga. Narayan did not identify with a specific religion or spiritual identity, yet described life as a journey and spoke from this place to draw out deeper meaning and purpose.

The participants had different spiritual and religious backgrounds, including Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Wicca and agnosticism. This is significant because there is very little understanding of the way that yoga teachers understand spirituality and religion. These case studies indicated that the participants have combined yoga with their existing religious and spiritual identities to add yoga to their individual spiritual practices and beliefs. While any deeper analysis of this topic was beyond the scope of this research, this insight provides an additional perspective to the way yoga has been reinterpreted to entwine with existing and developing religions and spirituality.

Activism with a basis in spiritual beliefs is commonplace, with many famous human rights leaders drawing on religion. For example, Mahatma Gandhi drew on Hindu and yoga philosophy and Christianity in his activism, while Martin Luther King Jr was a Christian activist who drew on the teachings of Jesus in his activist work. It is imperative that engaged yoga be considered a part of critical reflection regarding the way the religious and spiritual beliefs of teachers may affect vulnerable communities. This is particularly important considering the programs being developed cross-culturally. I was particularly buoyed by Seane Corn’s offering of engaged yoga in Cuba in 2016 ([www.seanecorn.com](http://www.seanecorn.com)). This undertaking was specifically presented for engaged yoga students to deepen their spiritual practices while engaging in cross-cultural immersion in Cuba. This retreat was designed to ensure that issues of power, privilege, race, oppression and colonisation were addressed and not overlooked.

This dexterity exemplified in Molly's case her underlying ethic was of unconditional love and acceptance that she taught using the practices of meditation and asana. She promoted equality through diversity and common humanity, as evidenced in her multi-faith approach to spirituality and inclusion of multiple teachers of spirituality in her school. She explained that her ethic of unconditional love has evolved from Christianity, the study of social justice and human rights, yoga philosophy and yoga therapy. Molly identified that ethics need to be grounded in daily actions for there to be integrity between beliefs and actions.

Thus, engaged yoga is viewed as an evolving conversation in the area of ethics, spirituality and religion. Engaged yoga is merging with new concepts, and will continue to be shaped and reinvented throughout this process. Spirituality may be part of the way that we define meaning and purpose for ourselves. The case study participants had different interpretations of spirituality, including the words and descriptions chosen, which took on a personal quality. What emerged was a personal description of life meaning, enriched through flexible dexterity between beliefs and practices.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This chapter highlights engaged yoga as an intimate practice bound in the relationship to oneself. The most significant themes that emerged from the data to illustrate the way that engaged yoga is experienced included the following:

- engaged yoga activists as empowered agents of change
- yoga as a sustaining tool for activists
- trauma, mental health and illness recovery
- entwining spiritual identities.

Knowing oneself is pivotal in engaged yoga, and provides the basis for being an empowered agent of change. It provides a way to understand one's capability in the world and to see oneself as able to cause change. There is a strong relationship between self-understanding and the effect of ill health and recovery from trauma. By taking a recovery-oriented approach, the participants were able to heal, find strength and resilience, and ultimately learn from difficult circumstances. The following section outlines the major findings identified in this chapter.

This chapter ends by returning to the fundamental components of kindness, compassion and love. Engaged yoga emerges through a loving self-relationship. It is grounding and hopeful to return to this foundational place to position activism. It is a reminder that, among all the most difficult complexities, there can be a stable and solid anchor. However, this anchor can be easily overlooked when seeking better techniques or arguments. Reminding oneself of the essence of compassion and understanding compassion for oneself is a fundamental distinction of engaged yoga.

## **Chapter 7: Engaged Yoga as Human Rights Activism**

This chapter outlines engaged yoga as a relationship between the self and other. This is demonstrated through the teacher and student relationship, self and community relationship, and individual understandings of the issues that affect humanity, expressed through everyday interactions. By focusing on the provision of service and the way individuals contribute to community and the world, engaged yoga provides a tangible contribution to social justice, collective healing and human rights. Earlier in Chapter 3, I argued that, for human rights to have an effect, they must be an accessible and relatable area of scholarship and practice. It is my intention that focusing on the efforts of activists will go partway towards rescuing the conversation from a more abstracted approach.

This chapter is framed based on the above ideas. I surmise that the case study participants have combined a variety of approaches to form what is considered engaged yoga. Engaged yoga is far from being a perfect and well-defined area—it is varied and at times contradictory. However, it is an attempt to use the capacity for human creativity, thought and interest to spark this consciousness in others. In the difficult times the world is currently undergoing, with mounting complexities, this effort is needed. This chapter also represents an attempt to convey the case study participants' understandings of engaged yoga. As identified at the end of Chapter 5, the themes that I believe present the components of engaged yoga include the following:

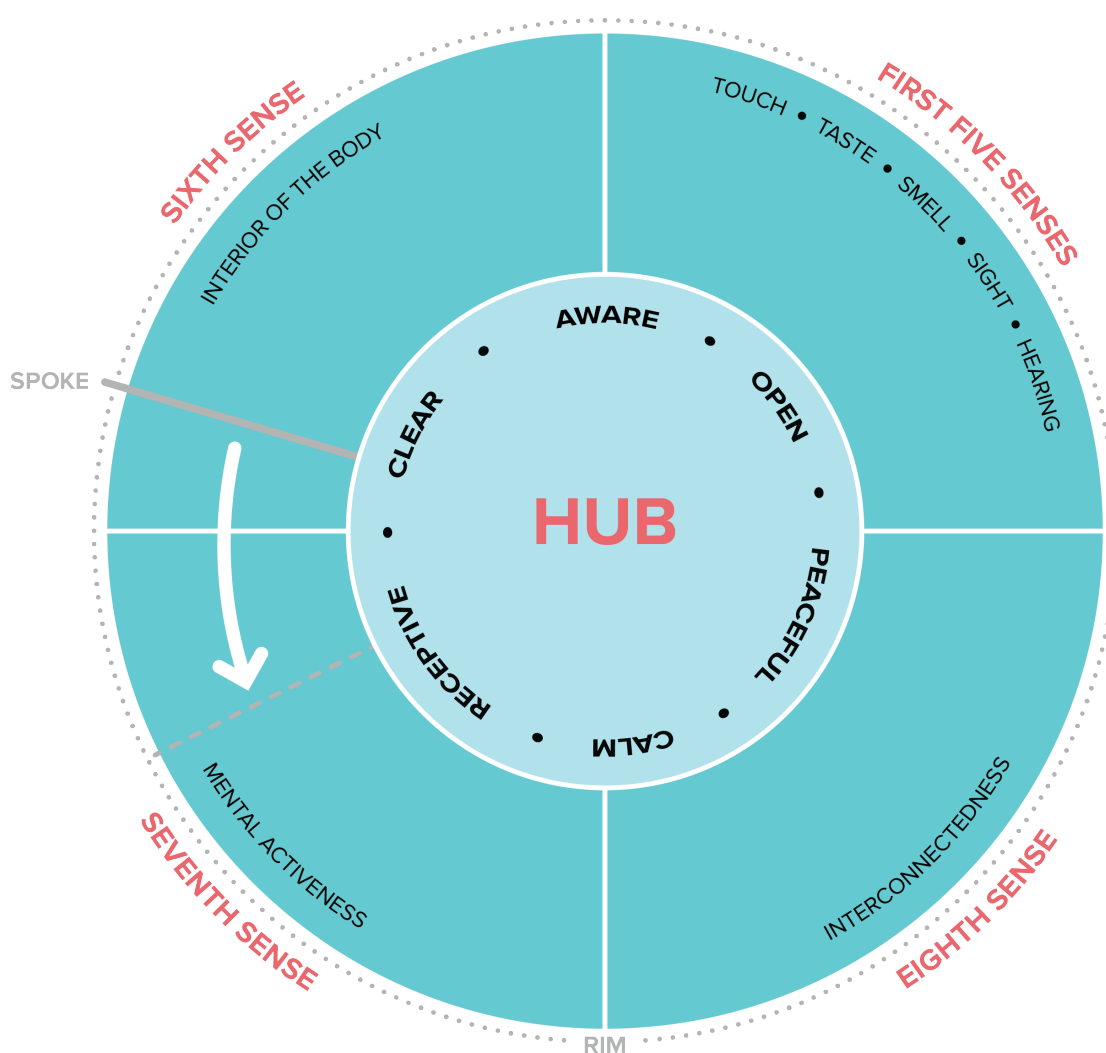
- leading others to embodiment
- healing the scars of trauma, and trauma-sensitive yoga intervention
- drawing on anti-oppressive practice principles
- redefining the role of the yoga teacher
- building communities of engaged yoga.

Throughout the case study examples, there has been incredible scope to glean the way in which yoga teachers have begun to blend human rights with their understanding of yoga. This marks a change in the way yoga teaching is constructed, and moves well beyond what is commonly referred to as yoga (featuring postures or asana).

## 7.1 Leading Others to Embodiment

I believe that the body is a rich and underused source of knowledge that has the potential to enhance human relatedness. Engaged yoga promotes the conditions through actively drawing students into the presence of their body. As depicted in Figure 7.1, Siegel (2016) illustrated human beings based on sensory perception.

### WHEEL OF AWARENESS



**Figure 7.1: Wheel of Awareness adapted from Siegel (2015)**

Siegel's (2015) demonstrated that the body is alive with possibility. In addition to the five senses, he included a sixth sense (the interior of the body), seventh sense (the mind) and eighth sense (interconnection). The focus of engaged yoga teaching is to directly



support students to explore their relationship with these senses, which are felt through an embodied whole. Cope described the goal of yoga as follows:

As we begin to re-experience a visceral reconnection with the needs of our bodies, there is a brand new capacity to warmly love the self. We experience a new quality of authenticity in our caring, which redirects our attention to our health, our diets, our diet, time management. This enhanced care for self arises spontaneously and naturally not as a response to a 'should'. We are able to experience an immediate and intrinsic pleasure in self-care (2000, p. 56).

As well as making the case for this in the case studies' own exploration, it also becomes the focus of their teaching. Engaged yoga directly aims to reconnect the person with their embodied state. The exploration of the senses is central to engaged yoga. Thus, using the body to integrate experience is part of the engaged yoga process. The body is not viewed as separate to the mind. Rather, alongside the mind, the body becomes the focus for teaching this restoration of self.

The body as a source of knowing has been overlooked, or even feared, by many professions (Fosha, Siegel & Solomon 2009; Mensinga 2015). More recently, there has been a broad interest in therapies to actively engage bodily knowing, specifically as it relates to understanding the subjective experience of human functioning. The reason for this growth derives from the understanding that introspection includes the capacity for reflexivity and greater self-knowledge (Pearson & Wilson 2009). Ponty (2002) demonstrated a similar understanding with his claim that we can develop our understandings through the body. Yoga has the potential to tap into the sensory experience for students, thereby encouraging presence, feeling and emotional literacy:

Practitioners are encouraged to work at their own pace by synchronising breath with movement. This internal awareness contrasts with the external awareness required for physical exercises that rely on external cues for bodily movement (Impett, Daubenmier & Hirschman 2006, p. 40).

With internal awareness of the embodied state central to engaged yoga teaching, the yoga becomes a vehicle for increased emotional literacy. For example, kindness, compassion, love, anger, hatred and rage can be accessed through the feelings of the body (Fosha, Siegel & Solomon 2009). By providing classes and instructions with a focus on drawing individuals closer into connection with their own experience, engaged

yoga becomes an expression of relatedness to the self and other. In the words of Fosha, Siegel and Solomon (2009, p. 12), ‘emotions are at the nexus of thought and action, of self and other, of person and environment, of biology and culture’. This interconnection becomes a vital component of the experience and language of relatedness. Engaged yoga demonstrates a commitment to embodied knowing and a turn away from intellectual knowing, which can be disconnected from the feeling state. Instead of being maligned as unimportant, emotions become the foundation for the process of self-understanding. Bodily experience and inward attention as the focus of the yoga practice were evident in the discussions with the case study participants.

However, this can be problematic. For example, yoga is not only a practice of embodied being. Also a fitness practice, this was seen as a tension. Molly struggled with the level of external focus in yoga, including the idea of being able to ‘master’ certain postures. She found that this derailed the concept behind her teaching and sometimes made it challenging to teach in a way that was more integrated. Jill stated that many students came to her classes with the belief that they could not ‘do’ yoga, and this meant that they could not make specific shapes with their body. Of course, with the sizeable field that comprises yoga, one cannot blame students for believing that the focus of yoga is being able to make physical shapes with their body, based on a certain ideal.

To remedy this, each of the engaged yoga teachers focused their teaching on the practices of mindfulness, the present moment and embodied experience. The focus on becoming present with the experiences of the body is foundational to engaged yoga. For example, Seane teaches flowing vinyasa, meditation and moving prayer to develop this knowledge in her students. Using cues, she encourages students to not think about their bodies, but experience them. Jill and Molly focus on teaching meditation and occasionally some postural yoga. They agree that the purpose of the practice is not mastery of postures, but exploring the experience of learning. Both Jill and Molly indicated that the purpose and emphasis of their teaching changed with increased experience. Hala, Jill, Molly, Narayan and Sarah found that teaching large general classes was not effective for them; thus, they began to work with more therapeutic approaches and mixed modalities. Eventually, this led some of the participants into the area of supporting their students to integrate the experiences of trauma.

## **7.2 Healing Scars of Trauma**

In 1996, the World Health Assembly declared that violence was a major public health issue (World Report on Violence and Health 2002). This acknowledgement of the extent that violence interrupts individual and social functioning marked a change in the way that violence had been approached. We can all identify the way violence is not an abstract idea, but a lived experience for each of us to integrate. We have all witnessed or been affected by events that leave scars. The scars inflicted through interpersonal violence are referred to as trauma. The extent and effects of life trauma differ from person to person, and this distinction is not about a hierarchy, but about acknowledgement of the complex and layered facets of trauma. I do not attempt to present a comprehensive overview of the way that trauma can be viewed—rather, this discussion merely touches on trauma as a specific component of engaged yoga. A central starting point is acknowledging that trauma is commonplace, yet deeply damaging. Discussing trauma is complex because the term has different meanings in different contexts. For example, everyone has experienced a traumatic event (van der Kolk 2014), yet not everyone goes on to develop what is considered complex trauma or C-PTSD, which refers to a specific group of symptoms that occur when individuals encounter (usually) interpersonal violence, often in early childhood (Kezelman & Stavropoulos 2012).

In all its proliferations, trauma is one of the most significant disrupters to the conditions for human wellbeing (Van der Kolk 2014). The effects are felt from individuals to communities, and we now know that transmission of trauma moves from one generation to the next through the process of intergenerational trauma, as well as through epigenetics (Kezelman & Stavropoulos 2012). Therefore, it is possible for vulnerable individuals and communities to carry the weight of cumulative trauma, developed over multiple generations (Atkinson 2009). The process of healing from such trauma is a significant undertaking. Now, more than ever, it appears that we require access to ways to be able to effectively process and find more freedom from the effects of trauma.

A major reconstruction of trauma has been moving it from a cognitive process to understand it more fully as a bodily experience to integrate:

Traumatic symptoms are not caused by the ‘triggering’ event itself. They stem from the frozen residue or energy that has not been resolved and discharged; this residue

remains trapped in the nervous system where it can wreak havoc on our bodies and spirit (Levine & Frederick 1997, p. 19).

Understanding trauma in this way has enabled a broader conceptualisation of effective treatments and ‘bottom-up’ approaches to trauma integrations—that is, approaches that use the body to discharge energy (van der Kolk 2014). Interventions that involve ‘bottom-up’ treatment engage the body in the process of integration. Yoga—specifically therapeutic trauma-sensitive yoga—provides one such avenue for the restoration that may be needed after traumatic injuries to the mind and body.

Interventions to integrate trauma are defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) as trauma-specific interventions (American Psychiatric Association 2013). One of the ways in which trauma is suggested to be is when the person can narrate the experiences of their lives and make sense of them through integrating and re-storying (Siegel 2009). Siegel (2009) suggested that recovery (also referred to as integration) occurs through the narrative of relating a coherent life story that integrates the experiences of trauma. Integrating experience can often be overwhelming in intensity or even repressed in the preverbal memories (van der Kolk 2014; Siegel 2005), which means that traumatic experiences do not necessarily have language attributed to them. Therefore, being able to experience the trauma discharging through the body—particularly long after the event has occurred—has become a vital piece of information that we can use to heal trauma (Levine & Frederick 1997). The last decade in developments of understanding the need to develop approaches that acknowledge the need for the whole person to be liberated from trauma has seen a rise in interest in approaches such as yoga.

This was evident in the stories of the engaged yoga participants in this study. The participants’ interest in yoga and trauma in general was developed through a process of practical and personal exploration. They began this exploration largely before any research was available regarding the intersection of trauma and yoga. Andi, Narayan, Seane, Hala, Molly, Jill and Sarah all demonstrated that, in the early stages, they began teaching in communities with sustained levels of trauma. There, they each realised that trying to teach regular classes in populations with prolific trauma was not always supportive for the students. They did not always have clear teaching around the way to support trauma integration. Therefore, they began to develop, experiment with and

adapt existing practices for populations experiencing trauma. For example, Sarah committed to teaching yoga practices to community agencies in Cambodia to support trauma recovery. With little research to guide the process, she began experimenting with some of the practices. She found that there were many challenges to teaching yoga in a cross-cultural environment to communities of people experiencing significant trauma symptoms. For example, the feelings that the students experienced were too difficult for them to 'stay with', and the students were easily overwhelmed during their yoga classes. Her teaching had to change to a more therapeutic and individual session structure to accommodate the students' trauma-related symptoms.

The processes that have been developed as therapeutically viable approaches to integration of dissociated bodily experiences are different from the regular classes of yoga 'found on most street corners' (Emerson & Hopper 2012). The hands-on adjustments and focus of the classes are dramatically different; thus, there is much information needed before embarking on yoga as a therapeutic approach to trauma recovery. Yoga teacher education and general population education is vital to fill the gap in expectancy and approach that is required for trauma recovery. While this is well underway in the US, with significant recognised programs for trauma recovery using yoga, there is very little currently occurring in Australia.

This was highlighted by Narayan's experience in refugee communities, which demonstrated that regular yoga classes (that are not trauma sensitive) can be unhelpful and even unsafe, causing re-traumatisation of vulnerable populations. Narayan became passionate about ensuring that vulnerable people were connected with the type of yoga that was likely to enable recovery, not cause further harm. Narayan's experiential knowledge is supported by recent research undertaken at the Boston Trauma Centre. Through their programs, the centre has developed a specific understanding of the way that trauma sufferers respond to certain yoga programs. Their research also suggests that yoga is supportive when used alongside a counselling modality (Emerson & Hopper 2012; van der Kolk 2014), and has been demonstrated to have efficacy in certain situations of trauma, such as among individuals with PTSD. Engaged yoga often works in trauma-specific interventions that have gained credibility and efficacy through a medical approach to trauma recovery, as demonstrated by the work of the Trauma Boston Centre. However, given that trauma is not only a complex mental health issue,

but also an everyday occurrence among humans, there is a dearth of space that yoga for trauma occupies.

Engaged yoga has important potential to support recovery and wellbeing among people who are suffering from the devastating effects of trauma. The case study participants demonstrated their knowledge of trauma through understanding the bodily sensation and the way that this can support others to self-regulate—a significant aim of trauma-specific treatment—and to integrate sensory experience that is often painful for trauma survivors. However, there are many challenges. The remit of trauma is extensive. Trauma can be constructed as a mental illness, assessed and treated through the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Thus, supporting trauma recovery through the practices of yoga is a specialist area with essential skills and knowledge development, as well as program development that works in conjunction with mental health practitioners. Given that this type of treatment is almost completely outside of the mental health setting in Australia at this time, it is challenging ground to traverse as a teacher and student. As yoga expands further into the areas of mental health and is rolled out to support vulnerable population groups—such as refugees, asylum seekers, adults recovering from child abuse and other groups experiencing trauma—the specific methods of teaching yoga and the specific issues and contraindications of the mental and emotional aspects of trauma must be understood. In addition, it must become paramount for teachers to understand the need to ask students about their mental health status (as with any physical injury), particularly in classes for trauma. I consider this an area that requires considerable communication and professionalisation in the yoga industry, so that trauma-specific yoga programs can meet the needs of consumers in an ethical and integrated manner.

The possibilities for developing more comprehensive approaches to trauma are both exciting and challenging. I believe that one of most vital contributions of engaged yoga to human relatedness is the individual and collective capacity to reconnect and integrate the self after traumatic experiences. Therefore, it is essential that any yoga teachers who are interested in working with communities that are vulnerable to trauma—such as women's shelters, young people and mental health settings—are fully trained in trauma-specific yoga and in more broadly understanding the principles of trauma-informed care. These teachers should be yoga therapists, rather than general yoga teachers.

Engaged yoga teachers must be comfortable working with physical, mental and emotional limitations for this to be an ethical endeavour. General yoga classes in areas of trauma recovery are inappropriate and may cause further harm for students and further disassociation from their embodied state. Currently, most yoga teachers do not have the requisite knowledge to undertake trauma-specific yoga teaching, and this must be a requirement to be able to work with vulnerable populations.

### **7.3 Drawing on Anti-oppressive Practice in Engaged Yoga**

While trauma-specific yoga demonstrates a skilled understanding of the way that the body holds trauma and the ways that yoga can support recovery, observable ‘green shoots’ of growth appear to be developing in conversations regarding power, privilege, classism, sexism, (dis)ability and colonisation in yoga (Berila, Klein & Roberts 2016). Critical engagement with these conversations appears to be happening significantly more in the US than in Australia. These conversations are essential to ongoing development of the links that are appearing in this emerging application of social justice and human rights. However, there is clearly a lack of a conceptual framework for this discussion. While most of the engaged yoga participants were comfortable discussing the concepts, the lack of framework for social oppression in the general yoga community means that this is not as strong as it could be. This weakness is to be expected, since the area of social justice and human rights is not traditionally included in teacher training courses. To counter this, I have grouped the issues regarding social and structural oppression under the umbrella term of ‘anti-oppressive practice’.

Anti-oppressive practice (AOP) is a term that has become part of social work and activism (Morgaine & Capous 2015), particularly in the United Kingdom. However, among the current study participants, AOP appeared to be in its infancy and an area of growth. While it is tempting to encapsulate the social aspects of trauma in a trauma-informed framework, it is clear that this framework lacks a conceptual model to demonstrate the way trauma is socially reproduced, and continues to be reproduced in the yoga community. Exploring and understanding the self in location relies on deeper connection to the way in which society is constructed. The below image is a depiction of the way that power and access in society can be understood. The closer one is to the core of power, the more access one has to what one needs (Morgaine & Capous 2015).

Drawing on the concepts of privilege and locating the engaged yoga teacher and student in their social locations provides the ability to understand the undertones that are present in the relationships between teacher/student and the central location of power. With very little specific guidance from an engaged yoga perspective, I observed the case study participants attempting to grapple with the complexities of oppression, not merely the effect of trauma students. Andi's case study evidenced some problematic encounters that arose from a lack of critical awareness of social oppression in yoga teaching. She affected the North American yoga community when she publically expressed her decision to refrain from yoga teaching and practice, based on an irreconcilable dilemma regarding the unspoken colonisation in yoga teaching, cultural appropriation and more general issue of colonisation in North America. She deduced that the most powerful way for her to demonstrate her beliefs was to distance herself from yoga teaching. She concurred that not all teachers should implement this approach, and encouraged everyone to process these issues and act according to their conscience. Conversely, Seane shared the same concerns as Andi, yet her action has been to ignite conversations and raise consciousness in the yoga community about the lack of critical conversations regarding politics, privilege and oppression.

Molly shared her insecurities regarding her newfound role as a social justice advocate. She confided that she quickly realised that she lacked language and information about social justice; however, her community brought this to her as central to the way they wanted to engage in their community. She began with practical approaches to social justice issues, particularly in relation to disability and inclusion. One of the first programs she began established classes that included people with disability. She reinforced that, in practice, this was not easy to achieve; however, making it the rule meant that people were given the choice to opt out of her studio if they chose. This study's group of engaged yoga activists demonstrated consciousness of the way that yoga classes, language, beliefs and teachings can reproduce oppressive circumstances for many people. This recognition is pivotal for raising awareness of engaged yoga practice. To stake a claim of rights-based, transformative and radical teaching in engaged yoga, I believe it is essential to be comfortable blending ideas that have not always been part of the yoga community, such as AOP.

Seane and Hala demonstrate commitment to AOPs by ensuring that all of their classes have a fee structure that reflects the economic advantage and disadvantage of their



student groups. In this manner, they are able to give students with lower incomes an opportunity to participate. AOPs underlie the engaged yoga approach; however, at this time, they are not necessarily well developed or understood. This is a nuanced field that requires much more detailed analysis and dissection than this research has been able to complete. Thus, this field remains a possibility for growth in engaged yoga.

## **7.4 Redefining the Role of the Engaged Yoga Teacher**

Engaged yoga is a construction that draws on numerous different disciplines. The areas of transcendence and individual transformation are often considered the focus of yoga teachers (Horton 2015); however, this study indicates that the case study participants did not necessarily meet this description. In general yoga teacher training, there is no emphasis placed on activism or social justice. If one is unsure what yoga is, then what is a yoga teacher? With so many possibilities, it appears that being specific is important. As the case study participants' experiences demonstrated, engaged yoga can include spirituality teachers, mental health practitioners, group facilitators, advocates and activists. Engaged yoga provides yet another reconceptualisation of the yoga teacher. It challenges the modern focus on asana or postural yoga, and adopts new avenues for engagement, consciousness raising and action. Engaged yoga demonstrates the way that yoga continues to form and reform. Even within the small study cohort, numerous creative approaches have been employed to join yoga with the participants' backgrounds and fields of study. This builds yoga teaching in this cohort as a dynamic and energetic display of human potential.

The case studies suggested that, when combined with human rights, yoga teaching develops into increasingly new territory. For example, Seane was active during the last US election. She rallied the yoga community to vote in accordance with their ethics. Meanwhile, Narayan has merged his interest in yoga with his teaching of social work students, and this helps him live in a way that is connected to his ethics. Instead of being fixed, yoga teaching displays the same potential as yoga—yoga teachers can quietly teach classes or can be political and change motivated, inspiring action in their communities and students. Moreover, three of the case study participants—Jill, Seane and Hala—have significant social media followings; operate large group training sessions; and actively facilitate training on topics such as white privilege, social injustice and oppression. They are influential in building community and leading

thought and action in engaged yoga. Thus, it is clear that, even within these case studies, the role of yoga teacher is vast and represents all the ways that yoga can be interpreted and reinterpreted. However, it is also important to point out that there continues to be criticism of yoga as being material and vacant, particularly in its more recent connection with Western culture (Horton 2015). This tension continues and is part of the terrain of modern yoga.

As some yoga teachers give more of themselves to the public realm, including the area of social justice, there must be space created in the community to consider and identify the tensions and ethical considerations involved in this action. How does one manage to work intimately with people on an individual level, as well as promoting one's own political ideals? What issues will this create and how can they be managed? Again, this was beyond the scope of this research; however, this discussion raises possibilities for the future. At times, the above questions meant the study participants were unsure what to do next. In the space of not knowing the answer and attempting to make and create change, they thrust themselves into community leadership roles. The space of relatedness is complex, compelling and fraught with difficulty. This does not mean that it is hopeless—instead, this indicates it is compelling.

## **7.5 Building Communities of Engaged Yoga Activists**

In seven of the case studies, the notion of community building emerged as part of the yoga teaching approach to relating. This was evident in the cases of Molly, Narayan, Jill, Jessica, Andy, Seane and Hala. These teachers demonstrated in their work the vital role that the yoga studio (actual, online or both) plays in joining and uniting people in pursuing the endeavour of engaged yoga. For example, in 2016, Seane led a group of American citizens into a cultural immersion in Cuba. The purpose of this excursion was to make connections with local Cuban people and see through the eyes of the local community, culture, art and politics. Moreover, when teaching community development subjects at James Cook University, Narayan's work with students is not only theoretical—he facilitates students to connect with community groups and identify problems to ensure they are learning from real life. Both Seane and Narayan identified that they are using the principles and practices of engaged yoga to sustain and support community education and work.

Andi, Seane, Hala, Molly, Jill, Sarah, Jessica and Narayan not only teach people who require their support, but have also gone on to develop teacher training so they can provide further education to the engaged yoga community. Through these teacher training sessions, a community of activism has grown through and around them. In Seane and Hala's cases, these communities have had incredible reach to countries and cities in many continents, including North America, Australia and New Zealand. They have been successfully able to draw together individuals who are interested in the intersections between healing and social justice that they have developed over years of study and practice. They have achieved this through active engagement on social media. Using the example of their combined program, Off the Mat Into the World, they have sparked interest in social justice programs through providing a framework and language to begin to integrate as engaged yoga. Hala specifically developed Off the Mat Into the World to encourage and develop other members of the global yoga community to be sparked into social action. In contrast, in Molly's case, she simply opened a studio in a neighbourhood that was participatory and engaged, and was subsequently thrust into the role of the 'leader'.

Building communities to ignite and fuel the service of engaged yoga has become central to the way these participants live and deliver the action of engaged yoga. Community inspires relationships within which one can understand difference and diversity. It is a space in which relationships can be fostered, and in which the ideals present in the original notion of human rights can truly take effect.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

It is difficult to consider the way in which one attempts to demonstrate their experiences of yoga. However, this research provides a glimpse of the way in which engaged yoga practitioners are attempting to achieve this. It is experiential and imperfect work. As has occurred throughout the history of yoga, engaged yoga has taken on the idiosyncrasies and diversities of the many approaches that are part of yoga. Of course, this is not without complexities. For example, one of the participants grappled with her role in reiterating cultural appropriation and colonisation in the North American context. Bringing this discussion to the centre of engaged yoga provides pertinent lessons that living in relationship requires. Becoming aware of one's influence on other people may

require change. This is not a failure. I consider this to be a growth in this area. In this chapter, I have considered the major themes that emerged from the case studies.

Engaged yoga has taken shape through a process that can enhance the embodied experience of students and can support the healing of individual trauma, which is paramount to the experience of collective wellbeing. The experience of being distanced from one's embodied state means that emotional literacy is beyond reach. I consider this literacy to be pivotal for the experience of relatedness. It is a primary focus of engaged yoga to support students to return to their embodied experience to achieve a richer and more meaningful exploration of human existence.

From here, engaged yoga teachers have begun to draw on a language of social justice and human rights, which could further be enhanced by deeper understanding of aspects of AOP, which provides an existing and practical application of social justice concepts in studios, teaching relationships, language and engagement. An increased knowledge and understanding of applying social justice values through increased knowledge of AOP remains an area that I consider vitally important for the engaged yoga community. Taking concepts and embedding them into everyday relatedness requires effort. Using existing knowledge and gaining support from related fields could prove beneficial and avoid potential pitfalls.

The role of the yoga teacher is adaptable and derives from the needs of the community. Further consideration of the training requirements and professionalism required in the area of engaged yoga could enhance outcomes. Engaged yoga is built around community; thus, working together to achieve common aspirations and betterment is foundational to this expression of yoga. There remains much potential in the field of engaged yoga for understanding human relatedness.

From this chapter, the thesis moves onto its conclusion. The following chapter provides a brief summary of the thesis; an overview of the main learning derived from this research; and a synopsis of the way to move forward with engaged yoga research, learning and action.

## **Chapter 8: Drawing Conclusions**

### **8.1 Overview of Thesis by Chapter**

In this, the final chapter, I provide a brief overview of each of the previous chapters and the main material covered in them. This is undertaken to provide a clear summary of the process and content pertinent to the final conclusions. From here, I provide some concluding remarks about my observations of what I consider to be engaged yoga. I also present some potential avenues for further research, and recommendations to yoga regulatory bodies to enhance teacher training. Finally, I conclude with auto-ethnographic writing that demonstrates the way that I draw on engaged yoga in my activism. I provide insight into some of the ways that I have used components of engaged yoga in my activism and teaching. My goal is not only to write about engaged yoga, but also to actively demonstrate it through a variety of approaches to activism. My hope is that this will support opportunities for others who may not be interested in reading formal academic work, yet may wish to be active in the area of human rights.

To reiterate, the purpose of this research was to explore the case study participants' relationship between their experiences of yoga practice and their understanding of human rights. The case study participants appeared to be developing what I observed as engaged yoga—a recent development in the area of yoga and contemporary human rights. Therefore, the thrust of this research has been to better understand the components present in engaged yoga. Of course, this is a limited and discrete piece of research, and engaged yoga is only understood through a mere eight case studies. However, my intention was to begin the process of more thorough research into this area. Although limited, the components of engaged yoga presented in this study provide a helpful framework for activism and for further research to be built upon.

### **Chapter 1**

This chapter presented the outline of the study and some of the early ideas that formed the basis for the direction of this research. It also included the research question and objectives, as reiterated below:

*Research question:* How do yoga practitioners with an interest in human rights describe the connection between their practice of yoga and their practice of human rights?

Research objectives:

- explore the ways that yoga supports the practice of sustained activism
- explore the ways that yoga practitioners' self-enquiry manifests in understanding relationships and interconnectedness with human rights
- explore the ways in which yoga communities may operate as activist communities of human rights—that is, examine their ideas about the use of yoga as human rights activism.

## **Chapter 2**

This chapter discussed the research methodology adopted in the thesis—qualitative existential phenomenology. This methodology emphasises knowledge as subjective and contextualised in the lived experience of the case study participants. To understand the lived experience of engaged yoga, I selected a mix of multiple case study and auto-ethnographic data collection approaches. This involved a process of defining individual cases, researching individual activists' stories and techniques of engagement, conducting in-depth interviews and attending the workshops the participants conducted. The chapter outlined the process of data collection and analysis. From here, the thesis moved to Chapters 3 and 4, which comprised the theoretical underpinning of the research.

## **Chapter 3**

Chapter 3 focused on contemporary understandings of human rights. In this chapter, I argued that human rights comprise a variety of interwoven approaches that focus on the way humans relate to each other. Far from presenting a definitive approach, I instead constructed human rights as an ongoing, dynamic relationship between the self and other. I drew on the work of scholars such as Ife (2010) and Santos (2007), who both articulated human rights as emerging from the 'ground up', and I argued that this is the way that this area must be reconceived. To reconceptualise human rights as essentially a story of 'the people', I heeded their words and looked for the essence of engaged yoga,

as demonstrated by the experiences of activists. However, engaged yoga is not merely a story of human rights—engaged yoga is an offering that draws on yoga.

## **Chapter 4**

In Chapter 4, I argued that engaged yoga is a continuation of the transformation and change that have always been part of yoga. I constructed engaged yoga as a contemporary manifestation that meets the needs of its time, merging with a variety of disciplines. This view positions engaged yoga as fluid and taking on the specific features of its context. I observed that some of the features connected with engaged Buddhism are seen in what I refer to as engaged yoga.

## **Chapter 5**

This chapter introduced the case study participants, whose generous sharing made this research possible. In total, there were eight case study participants—Andi, Seane, Narayan, Hala, Molly, Sarah, Jessica and Jill—and me. I drew each participant's experience into a discrete case study. Using a prescribed format, I wove their words into the structure of this thesis. Their thoughts, gathered from multiple sources—including interviews, research articles, blog writing, workshops, online training and speeches—were drawn together as the empirical data for this study. From the raw data, I developed the themes and subthemes, which I called the components of engaged yoga. Through understanding these components, I aimed to share a framework that can be used, adapted and built on by others. In such a complex field, I consider a framework to be an anchor with which we can develop, act, reflect, refine and remain accountable. The following areas were considered the components of engaged yoga, and were discussed in detail in Chapters 6 and 7.

## **Chapter 6**

This chapter explored the way engaged yoga serves as a foundation for contemplation, healing and inner sustenance. Most approaches to human rights and social justice place the 'other' as central. However, this chapter discussed that engaged yoga provides an alternative view of human rights that places the activist's life as central to the performance of activism. The case studies were imbued with the experience of healing, contemplation and growing – this is ultimately the process through which we become

more able to understand the human experience. The components examined were framed through the overall approach of responsibility for self, and then divided into the components of ‘becoming empowered agents of change’, ‘yoga as a sustaining tool for activism’, ‘recovery from suffering: mental ill health and trauma’ and ‘entwining spiritual beliefs’.

## **Chapter 7**

This chapter positioned engaged yoga as a variety of yoga that is connected to the pursuit of contemporary human rights. This is a marked deviation of yoga as an individual contemplative pursuit. The case study participants actively demonstrated their interpretation of human rights as a grounded and everyday activity, within which they use the practices of yoga as tools to inform their teaching. The components demonstrated as part of engaged yoga were as follows: ‘leading others towards embodiment’, ‘healing scars with trauma-sensitive yoga teaching’, ‘drawing on AOP principles’, ‘redefining the role of the yoga teacher’, and ‘building communities of engaged yoga’.

## **8.2 A Framework of Engaged Yoga**

Within chapters 6 and 7 the themes emerging from the research were discussed. These themes have become what I consider the significant components of engaged yoga, as it has been observed within this research. While this particular framework has only been developed based on a small number of case studies, it is the first attempt to understand the components of engaged yoga, through a research project. Therefore this may be a useful starting place for future research. However as well as future research, this also may provide a basis for others who are interested in engaged yoga and for those who seek to understand what is being considered when we utilise the term ‘engaged yoga’. Referring now to Figure 8.1, on the following page, which is a visual representation of the core components of engaged yoga, the inner purple circle represents an individual person and the radical stance that one adopts when we take responsibility for our thoughts, actions and way of *being*. The blue circle is the journey that was observed in



the participants. This journey was observed to be propelled by suffering but ultimately resulted in meaning making. The green circle represents the commitment to not only self-responsibility but also the desire to be of service through actions. The outer circle demonstrates the most common ways that these case study participants delivered this meaningful action. The four observable cornerstones of engaged yoga activism include not just teaching postures, but supporting others to be with the dynamic world within. This is referred to here as embodiment. Radically different to an exercise routine, it is the challenge to others to come to their senses, feel and to be authentic. The yellow quadrant is the work of building community. This is a purposeful pursuit of engaged yoga. The red quadrant represents the teaching style ‘trauma sensitive yoga’ which has become popularised recently. This style draws on disciplines as far reaching as neuroscience, yoga and psychology to develop techniques to support the integration of trauma. The final quadrant is anti-oppressive practice and yoga teaching. This is the newest development of engaged yoga. It is an exploration of intersectional and critical engagement with ideas of race, class, ability, gender, sexual orientation, colonisation and politics. Together these quadrants demonstrate the components of engaged yoga that demonstrate the connection to human rights.

# FRAMEWORK OF ENGAGED YOGA

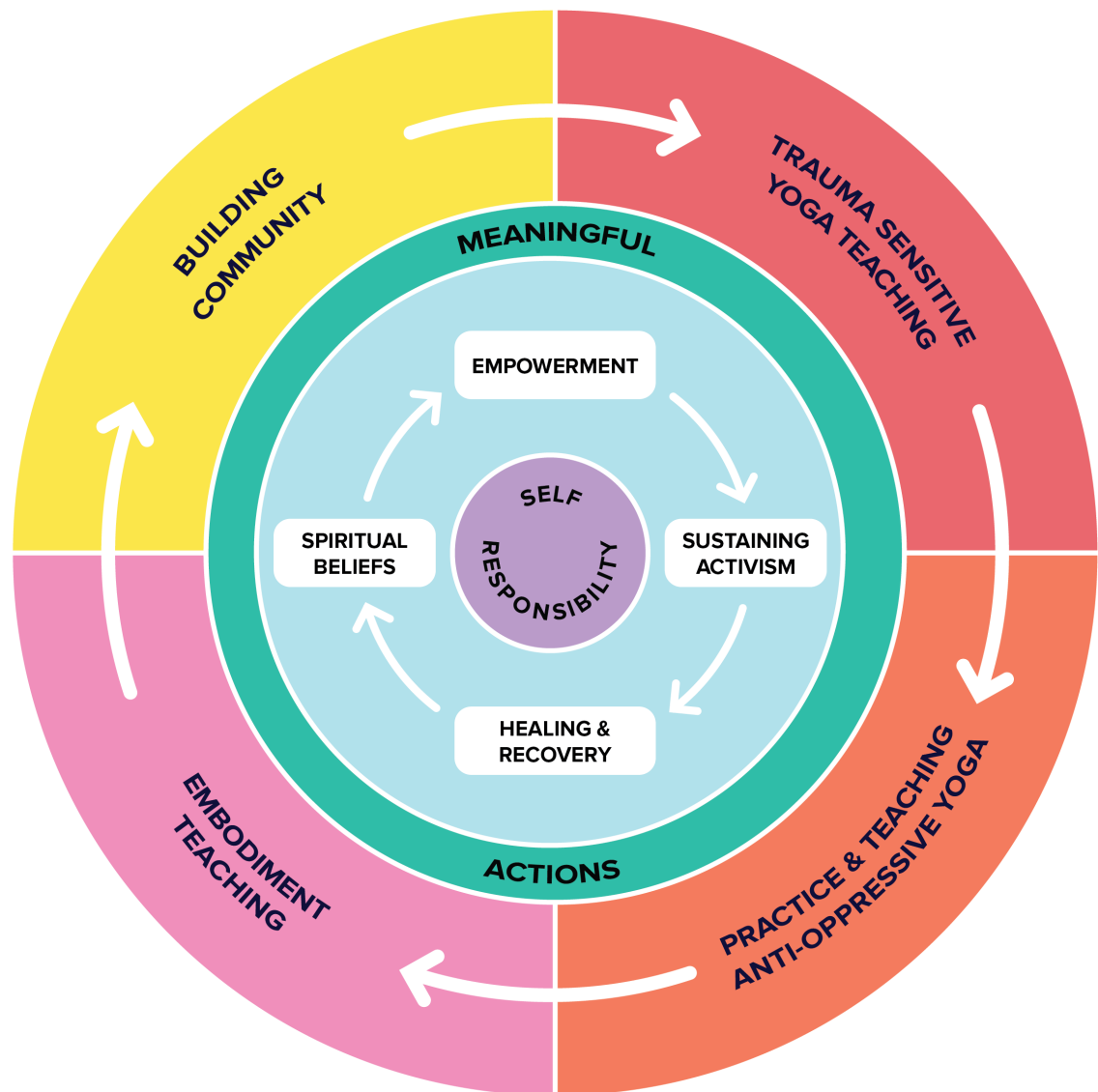


Figure 8.1: Framework of Engaged Yoga

## 8.3 Grounding Human Rights in the Everyday Experience

In lieu of a grand version of a universal human rights ethic—a united vision long associated with human rights—this thesis argues that global unity could be better described as a literal conglomerate of personal explorations. Therefore, we must be able to look beyond institutions and observe the way that individuals are beginning to make relevant to them the approaches that are often referred to as human rights. One way that I believe contemporary human rights activists are exploring this relevance is through

engaged yoga. Yoga has become a very popular practice, philosophy and exercise phenomenon in many areas of the globe. However, there is also a growing interest in the way that we can adapt the practices of yoga to become central to the work of human rights activism. As we grapple with questions of equality, dignity and wellbeing, all of which are conjured as the basis of human rights, we need to make this relevant. While I do not suggest that all yoga classes are currently teaching yoga as a way of understanding human issues, I do believe there is greater capacity to explore this concept, if teachers and students are willing. Over the years of completing this research, I have observed what seems to be increasing interest in this idea. However, alongside this interest are other competing forces that influence yoga, to which I have only given limited attention in this research project. For the purposes of this research, I chose a small cohort of engaged yoga activists and identified what I believed to be the central components of their approach to work.

#### **8.4 Engaged Yoga of the ‘Self and Other’**

Engaged yoga provides a possible avenue for understanding the self in relationship to the other. This does not only encompass a theoretical approach of reflecting on the self. As yoga has continued to change, it has encountered the complexities of contemporary human rights. This encounter has provided fertile ground for the concept of inter-being, connected to yoga and Buddhism, to be considered through a very practical approach. The tools that one can build through the practices of engaged yoga offer the potential to be in contact with the self during experiences as they occur. This present moment awareness is central to human relatedness, and, through understanding our embodied experiences, we can respond to others with increased compassion, through awareness of our own prejudices and beliefs. The focus on present moment awareness presents engaged yoga as a different approach to human rights activism. This approach is not merely reflective, but embodies the qualities that we consider fundamental to human wellbeing. The tools that are implicit in engaged yoga enable activists to reflect on the self in the process of their activism.

At the outset, I began this research with the specific purpose of understanding the components that are central to engaged yoga. I problematised the study and professionalism of human rights as often disconnected from activism. Of course, with global human rights issues central to the wellbeing of the planet, there appears no

greater time to garner momentum that moves this field into a deep reckoning with human rights, as a project that is tangible and highly relevant. The components that I found in the case studies provide a well rounded approach to human rights activism. I believe that these components will support others who are undergoing a journey into activism or who are interested in engaged yoga. I expect that, with more research, there will be a greater nuanced understanding of this field.

## **8.5 Engaged Yoga a ‘Ground-up’ Initiative of Human Rights**

In Chapter 2, I argued that the area of human rights appears to be in some ways separated from the activities of activism. In addition, the focus of human rights has been centrally defined as studying the ‘other’. This is problematic on many levels. For example, it is possible for a white, heterosexual Australian to study human rights and never actually examine one’s own beliefs about Indigenous Australians or transgender people. When thinking about studying human rights, the immediate assumption is that one is studying human rights atrocities to which others have been subject. While this is accurate, I see the need for a greater emphasis in human rights research on issues that do not merely consider the ways human rights abuses occur, but also focus on the way others respond to and perpetuate these abuses. Contemporary human rights scholarship must be dominated by contact with a more nuanced understanding of one’s place in the world, as layered, as complex and often with privilege and disadvantage co-occurring. Being able to skilfully negotiate this in relationship to other people’s place in the world becomes more detailed, and relies less on assumptions and more on engagement and conversation. This is not only for activists, scholars and researchers must be willing to engage in this reflexive approach. It demands that we contact others in their humanity and be willing to understand the way we have already constructed ourselves in relationship to other.

In this thesis, human rights are essentially understood as approaches that point to the ‘self and other’ in relationship. These relationships range from intimate relationships to international relationships between nation states. The point of similarity is that, through these relationships, our differences—including differences in power and belief to mention just two—become known. While there has been a long association of human rights with international politics and institutions, there has been a less compelling understanding of the way that each of us can use human rights in meaningful ways in

our own lives. My feeling is that, for the area of human rights to remain relevant, it is of utmost importance to translate these ideals into people's individual lives. The following section lists some of the most significant findings attained from this thesis. Although limited in their applicability, these findings may be useful for others pursuing an interest in this area.

## **8.6 List of Findings**

The following are some of the most significant findings from this research:

- Engaged yoga offers components to provide a holistic and flexible framework for activism. It may be of interest in the yoga community and to those who are interested in the way activism is constructed.
- Human rights comprise a grassroots, person-led project as much as an institutional responsibility. Observing everyday people attempt to grapple with the questions of shared resources, relationships between different groups, and complexities such as racism and trauma can be inspiring and unifying.
- Understanding human rights as personal and deeply connected to one's own existence is central to the continuation and applicability of contemporary human rights as an area of research and activism. While this does not attempt to solve some of the gross violations of human rights that individuals continue to experience, it enables connection to empathic and heartfelt stories and relationships.
- Experiences of trauma and healing can be a part of the journey in activism. It appears that, in the case study group, the healing of personal trauma added a deeper and richer sense of empowerment and subsequent commitment to change. Changing oneself raises the possibility that others can also change.
- Sharing stories of healing is central to contemporary human rights. The voices of violation must be heard to enable reflection and critical engagement with the reality of human rights. Broadening the term 'human rights' to encompass interpersonal violence and the effect of trauma is one way this can be achieved. Continuing to use the words 'human rights violation' when discussing issues such as rape, domestic violence, child sexual abuse or genocide is important to come closer to the actual meaning of the term, which is often glossed over by more sanitised descriptions.

- Self-enquiry and transformation are fundamental to engaged yoga. Through story telling, individuals can provide a relatable dialogue to engage others as they traverse the fields of activism themselves.
- Understanding the self as an evolving mind and body complex includes entering a relationship with trauma, pain, compassion and kindness. It is important to cultivate the knowledge that compassion is not a vacuous ideal, but a strong and determined way of living, to change the idea of activism as being about ‘keeping peace’ to being about an active ‘making peace’.
- Engaged yoga is a melting pot of approaches, professions, callings, skills, knowledge, backgrounds and interests. The diversity encountered, even within the small study cohort, indicates part of the strength and capacity of engaged yoga. This diversity also highlights the eclectic nature that is associated with yoga. I consider this diversity to be a strength that highlights the way that different and even contradictory worldviews can be unifying.
- Becoming a yoga teacher through a 200 or 500 hour course (as is most often completed in the US or Australia) does not give one the necessary skills and knowledge to work effectively and safely in vulnerable communities, or with trauma and mental health recovery. This should be considered a specialist field of practice and there must be appropriate standards for engaged yoga teachers who desire to work in these areas.
- Engaged yoga is in the process of growing as an offshoot of yoga and activism. There is currently significant discussion in the community—particularly in the US—regarding anti-oppressive yoga and yoga teaching. This is central to the commitment of engaged yoga to come closely into contact with complex issues central to human rights ideals.
- The case study participants indicated experiences of mental ill health and trauma recovery. Thus, specific priority should be given to the mental health and trauma recovery journeys of yoga communities, including yoga and mindfulness therapists and teachers. Stigma surrounding mental ill health and trauma recovery is likely to affect teachers and professionals in even more insidious ways than the general population. This is a topic that must be given further priority and consideration in these professions.

- The practices of yoga provide tools to support wellbeing and vitality. Through intentional self-care, the interviewed activists were able to extend their longevity and desire to remain hopeful and active in their work. Self-care is a critical component of activism and is sourced through many different approaches.
- Engaged yoga in this study was depicted through a variety of religious and spiritual approaches. This is a strengthening factor of engaged yoga, as it provides terms of actions that are built on both shared ideas and differences in beliefs. Engaged yoga does not necessarily mean that activists utilise a full spectrum of yoga practices and beliefs.
- Engaged yoga derives from a loving self-relationship. It is grounding and hopeful to return to this foundational place to position activism. It is a reminder that, among all of the most difficult complexities, there can be a stable and solid anchor. However, this anchor can be easily overlooked when seeking better techniques or arguments. Reminding oneself of the essence of compassion and understanding compassion for oneself is a fundamental distinction of engaged yoga.
- Engaged yoga provides a framework for human rights that is more accessible than theoretical approaches that were outlined in chapter 3. Focussing on activism in this instance, engaged yoga, provides a very different language and understanding of human rights. This I consider helpful for human rights, which I have seen become somewhat obstructed due to its irrelevance and also through a focus on scholarly arguing in lieu of human rights activism.
- Despite the challenges that we are currently experiencing in our shared world, including widespread and condoned violence, a mounting crisis of refugee people, political instability and inequity of basic needs such as food and housing, there are courageous people who try to make small changes. These small changes are actions that are filled with hope.

## **8.7 Areas for Future Action**

The future focus of human rights must engage activism, research and education. It is only through these actions that this endeavour can come alive. However, this is a more difficult task than merely knowing. The pursuit of contemporary human rights involves converting values and ideas into tangible realities. This is the area of activism and the

place of change. Human rights must become ubiquitous with action and activism, as an absolute priority. The human rights project only exists if it is tended by individuals who find ways to use their community, interests and cultural knowledge to begin to grapple with individual and collective wellbeing. Contemporary human rights education and research must focus on addressing ways we can support everyday people through becoming active, empowered agents of change. An inspiration derived from this research is the way that individuals can translate their stories or suffering into the pursuit of collective betterment. The centrality of personal healing to human rights education cannot be underestimated as a force that may be able to spark change and support sustainable activism. It is inspiring and igniting to hear from activists about the way they grapple with complexity, make meaning and continue action through hardship and failure.

There is great possibility and opportunity to harness the general popularity of yoga and to build this into communities that are interested in engaged yoga. The exponential growth in interest in yoga across many countries can benefit not only those who wish to sell yoga clothing and market their products connected to ‘yoga-inspo’, but also those who wish to engage the area of human rights activism, as witnessed among the individuals in the case studies. I consider the yoga community and the growing field of engaged yoga to be a vital area of potential growth for human rights projects and activism. This wave of interest can be harnessed to begin to develop opportunities to explore.

## **8.8 Recommendations for Yoga Teacher Training Standards and Approaches**

As stated in Chapter 3, there exist national and international standard committees for yoga teacher training. The boards that I have specifically contacted over the past two years are Yoga Australia and Yoga Alliance. To ensure that standards for yoga teaching consider recent research in the areas of trauma recovery, mental health and engaged yoga, it is essential to work with these organisations so that standards for yoga teaching and the area of yoga teacher training stay abreast of developments in research. During 2014, 2015 and 2016, I was a board member of Yoga Australia, and advocated for greater inclusion of mental health and trauma recovery as it relates to yoga teaching to become a standard part of all yoga teacher training courses. I will continue to liaise with



the teacher training boards to ensure that basic safety in yoga teacher training is met. The focus of my advocacy to Yoga Australia and Yoga Alliance is threefold, as follows:

1. Mental health first aid training should be mandatory for all qualified yoga teachers, so they can meet basic safety requirements for their students. This includes being able to interpret the limitations of yoga for mental health treatments and understand that not all mental ill health will respond to mindfulness and yoga interventions.
2. It should become an adopted practice in the Australian context to provide information routinely in classes both about physical injuries or pregnancy and mental health problems and illness, and to provide adaptations and information about contraindications as appropriate.
3. Yoga teachers must be alert to the way that language, beliefs and prejudice can cause harm to students, and that social oppression can be reproduced through studio environments, lack of awareness of privilege and the overt use of social power in teaching.

## **8.9 Areas for Future Research**

In terms of academic research, engaged yoga is in its infancy. Therefore, there is a blank canvas to begin to develop this as a field of academic scholarship. The US has a more developed dialogued in engaged yoga, particularly as it relates to critical human rights issues. The development of engaged yoga to incorporate AOPs alongside the already well-established trauma-sensitive yoga teaching practices is a prominent feature in the US. While there is significant commentary, online discussion and even training offered, there is little specific research to understand how we can incorporate AOPs into teachings and communities of yoga. Therefore, more critical scholarship is needed in this area, particularly as it relates to the yoga teacher and student relationship. Focusing on the effectiveness of interventions is also significant; however, the overreliance of research on the victims of social oppression, as opposed to the privileged, is indicative of understanding where we believe the problem lies.

However, it is my assertion that the focus in the future should not merely be research. Now is the time to focus on empowering communities and individuals to make a difference. The answer does not lie in institutions, however noble and prestigious they

may be. The change that the world seeks can only be found through the hearts and lives of everyday people. It is time to remember that the study of human rights exists in the everyday. It exists in the in-between spaces. It cannot be institutionalised and cannot be a victory of one demographic or another. It can only be found in the spaces between people because it is precisely a relationship between people.

### **8.10 Auto-ethnographic Conclusions**

At the outset, I asked the foundational questions of this thesis because, like all others who undertake research, I wanted to ‘know’. The answer was not in a book for me to read, and even if I had found the answer in the pages of a book, it would not have been my answer. My ‘answers’ are as unique as me, and I suggest yours are unique to you, because these questions touch on beliefs, connections and the way we derive meaning in our lives. They are some of the same questions that have been central to all human contemplation. On reflection, looking back to the outset of this thesis, I realise that I had tried to ‘know’; yet it wasn’t knowing that was missing. I needed to ‘feel’. It was not a lack of knowledge that motivated me—it was my lack of connection to the world around me that I felt so acutely and had to remedy. Knowledge seems safer territory for the rational mind; however, when we ask questions that contemplate suffering, our connection to the world, and our relationship to the self and other, we are asking ourselves questions about life’s meaning. Perhaps others try to ‘know’ human rights as well? As we continue to evolve what is understood as ‘human rights’ I am guiding knowledge through the way of feeling. Connecting to self, other, land and the greater mystery is experiential and it is through our senses, through our finger tips, through our feet on the sand and our own heart beat that we can understand humanity. I teach know with this imprinted into me and I hope that others find its relevance to their own stories.

As I move forward into the realm of teaching, I do so knowing that what I have to share cannot only be known with the mind, but must also be felt through the body. Of course, this seems out of place with so many of my educational experiences. I know that the outcomes of my research are not the problem—rather, the issue is the false construction of knowledge that has become disembodied from feeling. Human rights must begin with knowing oneself. In some instances, as seen in this thesis, there may be a process for rebuilding one’s inner world. Settling into a loving relationship with oneself paves the way to be able to settle into these relationships with others. I do not merely want to

perpetuate mindless ideas about love and inter-being, which are so often discussed, yet seem vacuous. Instead, I see to the area of human rights—so often described as legal or rational—to be instead a discourse for critical and conscious healing.

Attaining an experience of wholeness awoke in me a desire to share in ways that were personal, creative and meaningful. I would like to share this with you in some way to demonstrate that seeking to answer these questions led me to develop and deliver what I consider a small, yet significant, contribution to the human rights project through engaged yoga.

In 2014, I developed a small business focusing on supporting women to become activists for social justice in their communities. This allowed me to engage with the public on some of the current human rights abuses in Western Australia—most significantly, domestic violence and refugee rights. I have committed to sharing informative writing with the general public to increase the information that is often lost in mainstream media. Furthermore, I have operated many retreats to support women to become active in their communities and find their activist voice. I usually run these retreats and workshops as engaged yoga, drawing on asana, meditation, writing and group work. Other offerings include community engagement activities in sensitive and difficult areas, including using my own story about healing the trauma from sexual violence.

Womenkind is a heart-based women's leadership consultancy that supports women to develop their agency and be able to bring their knowledge and gifts to their families and communities. Through using my recovery experiences and sharing this with others, I have been able to garner meaning and purpose from the difficulties that I have encountered. This has filled me with purpose, and is a gift that I am grateful to have been helped to cherish and share. It is my intention to continue sharing my life and work to be of service and to support others. My focus has not necessarily been the pursuit of academic publishing and writing—this has been intentional. I decided early in my thesis that my work would involve communicating with a large group of people about these subjects. The type of people with whom I most wanted to engage were unlikely to be other academics interested in the same subject areas. Rather, I wished to engage with everyday women who had questions about the way they could use human rights to provide their life with deeper meaning and fulfilment.

In addition, based on the outcomes and recommendations discussed in this chapter, I have established Australia's first 'yoga for social action' teacher training (with colleague Dr Jean Byrne). In 2018, we are collaborating to develop yoga teacher training for social justice, which we believe will be the first postgraduate course of its kind in Australia. I have returned to work in the Third sector in Western Australia, eager to share with others in my field the value of self-knowledge.


For me, the outcome of this research is not merely the conclusion of this thesis—rather, the most fruitful outcome is the on-going commitment to engaged yoga as a way of life, relationships, activism and being.

## Appendix 1 – Statement Regarding Joint Publication

Kathleen O'Hare and I co-authored the following paper:

O'Hare, K Marinova, D (2013) '*Sharing common ground: human rights discourse and the practice of yoga*', Transformations, vol. 3-4, no. 78-79, pp. 232-249.

I can confirm that Kathleen O'Hare developed the ideas central to this article and then provided the drafts of this paper. Dora Marinova edited the document and provided comments to develop the arguments and ideas.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Dora Marinova', with a stylized initial 'D' and a trailing flourish.

Professor Dora Marinova

December 20, 2017

## Appendix 2 – Participant Information Sheet



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12 May 2014

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CRICOS Provider Code 00301J

Dear Participant

I am Kathleen O'Hare and I am carrying out research for my Doctor of Philosophy degree at Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Australia. My area of interest is the intersection of human rights and yoga. Particularly I am interested to understand how the internal changes which can manifest as a result of a committed practice contribute to a modern human rights dialogue. The title of my research project is *Modern yoga practice and human rights dialogue as reflexive embodied experience*.

I would like to interview yoga practitioners who are also committed human rights activists to share their experiences of inner transformation and to elicit if and how this changed perspective of self has or can contribute to social justice and human rights dialogue and practice.

This project has been approved by the Curtin University Research Ethics Committee.

### Participation

You may withdraw from the research process at any time with no negative consequences. You will be reminded that this is a voluntary process prior to each interview. Participation in the research includes one (1) individual face to face on Skype for a total of approximately two hours. If more time is required we would do a follow up Skype session. This will require a maximum of four (4) hours in total. Participation is entirely voluntary therefore you may choose to withdraw at any stage during the

process with no negative consequences. Following your interview you will be provided with a written transcript of your participation and you are able to edit and delete parts as you deem appropriate.

### **Confidentiality**

The interviews will be recorded anonymously and analysis of individual stories will not be identifiable or made available for any purpose. All transcripts of interviews will be kept in a secure, locked filing cabinet at Curtin University Sustainability Policy Institute.

### **Consent**

A consent form is provided for you. If you are unsure of what is required of you or if you would like further information or clarification regarding this process you may contact Kathleen on 0432711403 or Professor Dora Marinova on 08 92669033. Should you wish to make a complaint on ethical grounds please contact Human Research Ethics Committee, Secretary (phone: 92662784 or email: [hrec@curtin.edu.au](mailto:hrec@curtin.edu.au) or in writing to C-/ Office of Research and Development, Curtin University of Technology, GPO BOX U1987, Perth WA 6845).

Thank you for considering becoming a part of this research project. I consider your personal experience essential in order to draw together inner transformations through yoga and external manifestations of these changes through social action.

Kind regards

Kathleen O'Hare

## **Appendix 3 – Participant Consent Form**

### **CONSENT FORM**

*Modern yoga practice and human rights dialogue as reflexive embodied experience –*

*Kathleen Carter*

Please confirm the following statements by signing below:

1. I have been informed of and understand the purposes of the study;
2. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions;
3. I understand that I can withdraw, at any time, without prejudice;
4. Any information which might potentially identify me will not be used in published material;
5. I agree to participate in the study as outlined to me.

**PARTICIPANT NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_

**PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_



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